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Mohamed Abdulhasan

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REVOLUTIONARY/PASSIVE RESISTANCE TO PATRIARCHY: A COMPARATIVE READING OF SELECTED NOVELS BY MUSLIM FEMALE AUTHORS

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UNIVERSIDAD DE ZARAGOZA
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Revolutionary/Passive Resistance to Patriarchy: A Comparative Reading of Selected Novels by Muslim Female Authors

Mohamed Abdulhasan

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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University of Zaragoza

2023

Abstract

This study focuses on four novels translated into or written in English by Muslim female novelists of different cultural heritages. It approaches these novels from a Muslim feminist perspective. The main focus of the analysis is on the religious domain, which has been avoided by most feminist studies, particularly western ones. Muslim literature has constantly been examined from a secular perspective, which emphasizes cultural diversity rather than the religious diversity of its authors. This, in turn, has created some kind of conflict between Islam and literature. However, Muslim feminist scholars have been severely critical of such studies because of the limitation and inapplicability of western feminist theories to Islam. In order to shift the focus on religion rather than culture, the current study brings together contemporary Muslim novelists regardless of their widely different cultural backgrounds.

The main objective of this study is to compare and contrast Muslim feminist consciousness as revealed by Iqbalunnisa Hussain (of Indian origin), Nawal El Saadawi (of Egyptian origin), Leila Aboulela (of Sudanese origin) and Alia Mamdouh (of Iraqi origin) in their analyzed novels. Notwithstanding their explicit and/or implicit challenge to patriarchy, these novelists tackled the issue of Muslim women's oppression dissimilarly through their female heroines and the topics they put forward in their novels. Each of the above-mentioned writers employed her own Muslim feminist thoughts, drawn from the Qur'an itself, with indifference to globally circulated western feminism. They also endeavoured to refute the claims that Islam is the most misogynist religion by contributing an authentic knowledge about Islam and its essential principle, which ensures women's welfare when rightly applied.

It is concluded that the authors' socio-political contexts had a considerable effect on their writings. The novelists, being Muslim women, conveyed their own experiences through their writings in order to create intimate texts that validated their stories. Additionally, another observation that emerges from the current study is that, although the above-mentioned novelists are all Muslim, they adopted different techniques and raised divergent topics with a view to propagating their feminist views, claiming women's rights and leading their revolution against patriarchy.

Keywords: Islamic Feminism, Patriarchy, Islam, Women's Oppression, Iqbalunnisa Hussain, Nawal El Saadawi, Leila Aboulela, Alia Mamdouh.

Dedication

I dedicate the present PhD Thesis to my late mother, who always dreamed of seeing me successful; my father, who has hidden his suffering upon his bed of pain in order to keep my resolution always at its highest; my wife, who has always been my best self-sacrificing supporter; and my children, who always look up to me. This Thesis is also dedicated to all the nice people I met at the University of Zaragoza, where I found true support, kindness and fraternity.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1. A Close Look at Feminism

Although the coinage of the term *féminisme* has been erroneously attributed to the French philosopher and early influential socialist thinker Charles Fourier in the 1800s (Suraju, 2015, 57), or to Huberrine Auclert, who introduced it in her journal in the late 1880s (Badran, 2007, 24), its origins are still uncertain (Offen, 1988, 126). For other critics, the beginnings of feminism could perhaps be traced back to Guillemine of Bohemia, a preacher and mystic, at the end of the thirteenth century (Rowbotham, 2014, 22).

With the first call for women emancipation, not only men but also women were divided among themselves regarding their attitudes towards the feminist movement. Although a group of feminist activist women were striving to escape the manacles that kept them in complete subjugation to men, another group of women utterly considered love and obedience to be absolute moral and religious principles they had to comply with.

Bouten (1922, 1) once dubbed such obedient women the "worst enemies to revolution"; yet, he found such division among women natural. Bouten believed that it might result in a variety of movements as there was disparity in attitudes and intelligence among individuals. Without taking these differences into consideration, a number of problems would inevitably arise. In addition to the reasons Bouten referred to, I would add, religion, traditions, conventions and the different degree of strictness with which individuals in different societies practise them are also vital to bring about different feminist branches and attitudes.

Advocators of women's rights encountered a great deal of opposition which, if not successfully dealt with, would block the way to achieve the claimed equality between sexes. Opposition was mainly carried out on account of women's physical capabilities of handling social duties rather than domestic ones. Some were sympathetic with the cause of women, and considered physical differences between sexes to be something trivial and

having no effect on woman's efficiency in handling any kind of social activity. Others, on the contrary, believed that a woman was modeled after her sex, which was regarded as inferior to man's, and thus highlighted sex differences and suspected the consequences of applying such complete equality between them (Nicholson, 1997, 3). Eventually, some women managed to have enough freedom to choose between social and domestic life, which contributed to bringing to the surface what emancipation-champions could achieve (Bouten, 1922).

Among the earliest advocators of feminism who favoured women's rights was the eighteenth-century British feminist Mary Wollstonecraft. She is best known for her revolutionary feminist manifesto, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1993), first published in 1792. The revolutionary and controversial thoughts that Wollstonecraft put forth in her work were not only considered to be morally unacceptable, but they also caused "a certain amount of sensation" (Williams, 1984, 62). However, what she proposed would be later on acknowledged as praiseworthy. Since Wollstonecraft's views transcended the strict religious and traditional norms ruling her society (Pichanick, 1977, 20-21), they were rejected by many contemporary writers of hers, only to strongly reappear in the second half of the nineteenth century as a permanent "strand of opinion" (Williams, 1984, ix).

As is well known, over the last three centuries feminist debates and ideas have been introduced and elaborated on. However, what feminism exactly means or encompasses remained for long a complex question that was impossible to answer in a simple way (Caine, 1997, 2). Encapsulating the concept of feminism in a single short definition was by no means an easy task. Feminist movements in different parts of the globe have undergone a number of phases that dovetailed into different branches and ideologies. Each movement has given its own definition in accordance with its own principles. Defining feminism, according to Offen (1988), must be preceded by some generally accepted understanding of what this term actually means. As I see it, the best way to acquire such understanding can be achieved by taking into account the "cumulative knowledge" that people have gathered regarding socio-political changes in women's lives and how this knowledge has historically developed in divergent cultures (Offen, 1988, 120).

Neither the extent nor the nature of feminism can be fairly assessed without understanding the changing social, political and economic conditions of women within the family and the society they live in. These changes were extremely complicated and diverse, “varying considerably according to social class, ethnic, and religious origin and regional location" (Caine, 1997, 14). Therefore, to analyze the feminism developed in a single culture or time in such an exclusive way that it becomes the one and only general model to follow will never give a supple understanding capable of interpreting other cultures and periods (Offen, 1988, 120). To put it differently, pinning feminism down necessitates the presence of both historical and comparative backgrounds in order to come up with some balanced conclusions, and this will be one of the main aims of this study.

Although there are a number of definitions that compete to explain what feminism is all about, many feminist theorists and activists still have difficulties to figure out what this movement actually means. It even happens sometimes that some people declare themselves as non-feminists when they actually defend a feminist agenda. In 1913, the British journalist, novelist, and critic Rebecca West wrote: “I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is, I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat or a prostitute” (as cited in Walters, 2005, 1). Feminists’ disability to realize their true attitudes could thus be attributed to their lack of comprehension of the meaning of the term. Obtaining intelligible clarification, as Offen (1988, 121-22) puts it, is of great significance, because feminist historians and theorists, together with academics working in other disciplines concerned with feminist studies, are eagerly in need of a common framework that helps them to support their theories, studies and interpretations.

Feminism is generally defined as a movement that claims the economic, social and political equality of the sexes; however, this general definition is frequently altered, extended or even shortened according to the aims, ideologies and politics of each feminist movement. In 1914, Marie Jenny Howe tried to explain the inner and outer aspects of women’s experience by describing the relationship between psychological, political, cultural and economic changes. She defined feminism as:

> Woman’s struggle for freedom. Its political phase is women’s wish to vote. Its economic phase is woman’s revaluation of outgrown customs and standards. […] Feminism means more than a changed world. It means a changed psychology, the creation of a new consciousness. (as cited in Rowbotham, 2011, 33-34)

Bouten (1922, 2-3) attempted to explain that the platform upon which the feminist paradigm was based was concomitant with certain criteria. 1) Physical enfranchisement claims that women are human beings who have souls, wills and responsibilities which, in turn, grants them absolute freedom from the domineering master and his whims. 2) Intellectual emancipation assumes that the education of women is the only tool that enables them to use their minds reasonably, which will accordingly result in placing them on an equal footing with regard to men. 3) Moral emancipation is to accredit women the same quality and value, moral duties and responsibilities attributed to men, which had for long been determined by gender considerations. 4) Social emancipation, which goes hand in hand with the previous demands, encapsulates the basic ideas of utter equality between men and women in the social and political spheres. This being said, it is true that feminism, in its beginnings, was mainly concerned with women’s political and legal rights, and that such concern has become in many places only a small part of what feminism tries to achieve in the present day (Caine, 1997, 2).

For quite a while, discussion and debate over feminist assumptions were perceived as “fragmentary” and “spasmodic” (Caine, 1997, 1). They were thus viewed on account of some controversial ideas which were regarded as a gross violation of religion, traditions and conventions. Although such feminist discussions partly began to fade away in the period that followed the First World War (Caine, 1997, 1) with the publication of canonical western feminist works such as Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), Simone de Beauvoir’s *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949, *The Second Sex*, 1953), and Elaine Showalter’s *Towards a Feminist Poetics* (1979), it has finally become possible to trace down the history of feminism and its development (Ginsberg & Lippard, 2010, 420).

Since the early nineteenth century many feminist movements have emerged, and each has demanded women’s rights according to the context out of which it originated.

Examples of such movements are: Black Feminism, Liberal Feminism, French Feminism, Marxist Feminism, Transnational Feminism, Socialist Feminism, Postmodern Feminism, Postcolonial Feminism, Feminist Theology and Atheist Feminism and Islamic Feminism, to mention but some. As their names suggest, each of these movements gives an impression of what its followers might be like. Generally speaking, however, feminism is a movement that is widely known on account of its different waves.

1.1.1. First Wave Feminism

The term was coined by Marsha Weinman Lear in 1968 (Henry, 2004, 58). It refers to the first concerted movement of feminist activism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. First wave feminism unfolded in an environment of "urban industrialism and liberal, socialist politics" (Rampton, 2015, par. 4). During that period, activists fought for women's political power (the right to vote) and property rights. Although it was mainly concerned with middle class women, the political agenda of the first wave feminism expanded to consider issues of marriage laws, employment and education (Angela & Audre, 2012, par. 1). As a reaction to the thoughts that Wollstonecraft had put forth in her *Vindication*, some feminist authors who also represented the first wave wrote some books to "inspire women with a sense of mission […] which combined patriotism with dedication to their families" (Gamble, 2004, 16). The main figures of first wave feminism include Hannah More (1745–1833), Sojourner Truth (1797–1883), Mrs. Sarah Ellis (1799 –1872), Elizabeth Blackwell (1821–1910), Jane Addams (1860–1935) and Dorothy Day (1897–1980), among others.

1.1.2. Second Wave Feminism

Towards the end of the 1960s, second wave feminism emerged out of the leftist movements that rejected reducing women to second-class citizens in the United States, Britain, and Europe (De Clercq, 2013, 15). For Nicholson (1997), second wave feminism was something important that occurred in the 1960s and is still spinning itself out. This movement brought forth a "new intensity in many societies in the degree of reflection given to gender relations" (1). The most important concern of second wave feminism was to oppose any kind of oppression exercised against women, and to ensure social equality between the sexes with a view to undermining the patriarchal social system. Moreover, second wave feminism examined the way in which patriarchal characteristics were present

in most literary or cultural productions, and how such characteristics aimed to "reinforce or undermine the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women" (Tyson, 2014, 83).

In the early 1970s, two contradictory perceptions coexisted in western society. As Nicholson put it, firstly "the differences between women and men were deep and rooted in nature and, secondly, that women and men were basically the same" (Nicholson, 1997, 3). Thus, second wave feminism was basically hailed "for the removal of the social barriers that had constrained women's lives" (De Clercq, 2013, 16). In consequence, the ultimate goal of second wave feminism was to achieve the social justice that provides all citizens with equal opportunities to develop, express, and exercise their potential as humans, regardless of their sex. Unlike the first wave, which was mainly concerned with middle-class white women, second wave feminism made room for "women of colour and developing nations, seeking sisterhood and solidarity, claiming women's struggle [was] class struggle" (Rampton, 2015, par. 9).

1.1.3. Third Wave Feminism

Third wave feminism was "informed by post-colonial and post-modern thinking" (Rampton, 2015, par. 10). Essentially, it was dedicated to advocating the rights of groups and individuals striving for gender, racial, economic and social equity. It emphasized the inclusion and diversity that were neglected by the second wave. Third wave feminism, as Evans (2015) puts it, was an attempt to resist the perceived "dogmatism" imposed by the second wave. Evans also states that third wave feminism has been concerned with "intersectionality as a defining concept that recognizes multiple and overlapping points of identity". It focuses on "understanding and practicing feminism through a lens of diversity and with a sharper focus on social justice issues". Furthermore, third wave feminism allocates more emphasis on "speaking to women of colour" (2015, 22). Moreover, unlike their predecessors in the first and second waves, the young feminists of the third wave readopted the "very lip-stick, high-heels, and cleavage proudly exposed by low cut necklines" that were identified with male oppression by the first two previous waves (Rampton, 2015, par. 10).

1.1.4. Fourth Wave Feminism

Fourth wave feminism emerged in 2012. It was mainly born on the internet and depended primarily on social media to address issues like rape culture, sexual harassment and body shaming (Abrahams, 2017). Individualism, social mobility and greater liberation have been the main concerns of the earlier three feminist waves, while the focus of fourth wave feminism has chiefly been equal payment for equal work, justice against assault and bodily autonomy (Rampton, 2015). Although some claim that fourth wave feminism originated in the US, the term has been widely championed by the British since 2013 (Chamberlain, 2017, 1). Fourth wave feminism, according to Chamberlain, does not only advocate women's rights, but it also recommends that men should be given greater opportunities to freely articulate their feelings and emotions, to present themselves as they desire and how they, as fathers, should be engaged parents to their children.

1.2. Eastern Feminism

In the nineteenth century, the Arab world welcomed the age of *al-Nahada* (Arab renaissance) as a social, cultural and intellectual movement that prevailed in most Arab countries since the 1830s. It was viewed as an attempt to revive Arab identity and language, which were highly affected by Napoleon's invasion of Egypt and the Ottoman rule that followed (Zerukhi, 2000, 88-89). The Arabs tried to restore their identity chiefly by introducing a pure Arabic literature (Zerukhi, 2000, 88-89). During that time, enlightened intellectuals realized the significance of the role that women could play in promoting their societies. They also became aware of the importance of enabling women to access some kind of education, without which they could not effectively take part in social and cultural activities and, more specifically, in literary production (Mahdi & Shamsi, 2011, 136).

Simultaneously, new terms such as *Ta'lim al-Nessa'* (Women Education) and *al-Jam'yat al-Nessa'ya* (Women Associations) appeared and became commonly circulated to signify women-related activities (Mahdi & Shamsi, 2011, 136). In addition, many pro-women associations and magazines emerged at the turn of the nineteenth century. The most popular were *Zahrat al-Ihsan* (1880) (The Flower of Charity Association), *Bakuret Sourya* (1880) (Syrian First-Fruits Association), *al-Mara'a* (1893) (The Women Magazine) and

Yaqdat al-Fatat al-Arabia (1914) (The Awakening of Arabian Girl Magazine) (al-Nimnim, 2005, par. 10; Khalifa, 2008, 8; Mahdi & Shamsi, 2011, 136).

Although specifically dealing with women's issues, these associations and magazines were administered by men, though. Al-Tah'tawi's *Al-Murshid al-Amin lil Banat wa al-Banin* (The Reliable Guide for Girls and Boys) was published in 1872. It insisted that female education is of great importance and women's minds are equal to those of men in terms of thinking and comprehension (2012, 143-46).

In his influential book, *Tahrir al-Mara'a* (Woman Emancipation) (1899), Qāsim Amīn, who is considered to be the father of Arab feminism, comprehensively detailed women's status in the Arab world. Amīn stated that when women were compared to men they were seen as insignificant, and also denounced that they were often treated as mere tools for men's gratification; they were used to satisfy men's desire and were thrown out when their libido vanished (20). In light of women's inferiority, he went on to argue, slavery, ignorance, irrationality and obedience were attributed to them, while freedom, knowledge, rationality and command were all associated with men (Amīn, 1899, 20).

Amīn ascribed women's deteriorated conditions to the autocratic governments that successively and conspicuously ruled most countries in the Arab World. The principle of using absolute force on the part of the ruler to ensure people's total obedience was also reflected in the way women were treated by men. By subjugating women, Amīn (1899, 19-20) argued, men were making up for their weakness in confronting despotic authority. Since women were characterized with powerlessness, all the spheres of their lives were susceptible to exploitation by men, who yearned to prove their powers, at least in front of them. Additionally, women in general were liable to degradation regardless of their positions, i.e. whether they were mothers, wives or daughters.

Amīn also mentioned that eastern women's scorn and degradation, specifically in the Arab world, continued till the end of the nineteenth-century, when women's conditions started to ameliorate on account of men's intellectual improvement and the moderation of authority (21). Haddad (1984) pointed out that, since Amīn's call for women's liberation in his book *Tahrir al-mara'a*, the status of women and their role witnessed tremendous

changes. Despite the fact that women's cause was maligned by some, it was championed by others, who encouraged females to take on empowering positions in various aspects of their lives (Haddad, 1984, 146). Before the age of *al-Nahada,* women were not allowed to leave their homes. It was not until 1932 that the first group of women were sent to study in the same Egyptian universities from which so many men graduated (Mahdi & Shamsi, 2011, 136).

In *Al-Untha hi al-Assil* (Female is the Origin) (2017, 158), first published in 1977, El Saadawi claimed that historians and anthropologists eventually re-studied history in the second half of the twentieth century. They did so because biology, physiology and anatomy had refuted all the previously adopted theories, which had differentiated the sexes physically, psychologically and mentally. Only then was some light shed on the male-female relationship, and scientists corroborated that women had lost their natural position, which would have otherwise made them equal to men.

In her influential book *Al-Wajh al-'Ari lil-Mar'a al-'Arabiyya* (1977) (Translated into English as *The Hidden Face of Eve*) (1980), El Saadawi argued that the woman portrayed by both old and contemporary Arabic literature was not the real Arabian woman. Drawing on history, El Saadawi demonstrates that women preceded men in thinking and acquiring knowledge (1980, 211). In clear contrast to this, many critics often state that, compared to men, Arab women entered the domain of knowledge and education too late (Mahdi & Shamsi, 2011, 136). As an attempt to restore the high status women once had, particularly in the Arab world, feminist activists endeavored to disseminate their vision of desired positive change.

When trying to trace feminist activism in the Arab world, Golley (2010) listed three fashions that have outlined Arab feminism. First, there was a movement that called for Islamic and social reforms, and claimed for women's rights as part of that general campaign to improve Islamic societies. Second, some intellectuals showed an avid advocacy to revolt against traditions and conventions, which had been reinforced by the misinterpretation of religious texts and further encouraged by the dominant trend of the colonizers' politics to grant men absolute authority over women in the existing social system (Ali, 2019, 4).

Thus, in their attempt to achieve democracy and social liberation, cultivated men and women, who mainly belonged to the national bourgeoisie and/or petit-bourgeoisie, were the first to call for women's emancipation. In its third phase, Arab feminism was considered to be the continuation of the double struggle carried out by reformists against old social, economic and religious regulations on the one hand, and in favour of national feminist identity on the other. They had to resist the very modern European ideals on which they founded their movement (Badran & Cooke, 2004, xx; Golley, 2010, 27; Jayawardena, 2016, 5-7). As I see it, this movement represented the departure point for some activists toward a more compatible and Islam-related way to retrieve the rights previously granted to women by Islam.

For El Saadawi, women's emancipation in the East is fundamentally a political case, as it does not only pertain to half of the society, but rather affects society as a whole. As this writer and critic explains, restraining or ignoring women affects men and children as well, and has rather negative effects on the development and well-being of society (2017, 152). By the same token, Badran (1996) demonstrates that the birth and institutionalization of Arab feminism emerged from a "coalescence in solidarity around a nationalist cause, the Palestine cause" (240), and that its development was partly due to the limitations of international feminism.

Increased interest in eastern women's status was concomitant with modernity and its impact on the East. As a result, women's condition, roles and goals became "part and parcel of the revolutionary ethos that has permeated society" (Haddad, 1984, 137). In an attempt to achieve some kind of parity with the West, liberal people, particularly intellectuals and politicians, tried their best to transform the institutions of the Arab society by implementing various developmental plans that would ensure the required social change (Haddad, 1984, 137). However, such attempts were severely censured by the conservatives, who believed that any endeavour to modernize Arab society was merely part of a process of westernization and/or neo-colonization to control their respective religious, social and political spheres. Such complete rejection of any kind of social development exacerbated eastern women's misery and this, in turn, stirred eastern thinkers to take action.

In lieu of the loud form of protest as the most effective tool, Arab intellectuals decided to invest the power of their pens as the only means to bring about essential changes in their society. Their main concern was thus to fight against those who oppose any kind of reformation, and the establishment of social justice within a system that "draws its authority from the autocratic power exercised by the ruler of the state, and that of the father or the husband in the family" (El Saadawi, 2009, 352). As a result, influential feminist works have been employed as a vital weapon to fight against all of this in the East.

Like Westerners, eastern writers employed fiction as an effective vehicle to improve women's conditions. The image of the female character previously introduced by male-authored novels was accordingly different, at least to a certain degree, from that later on introduced by female writers. Not in vain had the novel so far been the most masculine of all genres. Some male novelists, like Naguib Mahfouz (Nobel Prize winner) and al-Tayeb Salih (the father of modern Sudanese fiction) (Hassan, 2008, 298), did their best to write about women from a female perspective. Yet, they were not very successful. The disparity between male and female writers when dealing with women's issues has been a bone of contention among critics. Some argue that since there are biological differences between males and females, their writings should also be dissimilar (Aubeid, 2007, 188; Gardiner, 1981, 350). Others, like Tarabishi (2013, 19), assert that male writers use their minds when writing fiction, while female writers depend primarily on their hearts when penning their novels.

Female critics, on the other hand, ascribe the differences between male and female's fiction to the meager education that women previously received when compared to men's. In her comment on the previously prevalent attitude regarding women's fiction, Sharma (2004, 8) argues that, due to their sex, female writers were denied access to public education. As a result, they missed the opportunity to acquire the necessary training in the classical curriculum, which would be exploited by male writers to justify their superiority. The disparity between those who were well or poorly educated could also be seen among women belonging to the same society, as Sharma's comparative study between Muslim and Christian Arab women living together clearly shows. As their religion was allegedly thought to be more liberal, Christian women had the chance to subvert the strict system,

which had denied them access to basic education, social life and any other activities that were vital to any writer. Zeidan (1995) remaks:

> Christian women were disproportionately well-represented among the more successful women writers, as so many of them were educated in western missionary schools. This meant that, in relation to their Muslim counterparts, they were more likely to have read a great deal and to have learned values that reflected women's greater freedom in the West. (5)

On the other hand, in her well-known article "Women's Rights and Imperialism in Iraq: Past Meets Present", the sociologist Zahra Ali (2019) ascribes the disparity among people of the same society, together with the different rights they were granted, to the politics of the colonizer and its aftermath. She further explicates that this disparity was far too obvious among women with different religious and sectarian belongings. She remarks: "differences existed among women: Muslim and Christian women were not granted the same rights regarding personal matters, neither Sunni nor Shiʿa [the main two sects in Islam], and the gap was even stronger between rural and urban women" (2019, 4).

In addition to what was previously said it is clear that, since men have not suffered the power of patriarchy in a conservative and religious context, they are unable to reflect women's misery as accurately as females do. Gohar (2016, 174) points out that many are the male writers who have focused their works on women and their plight. However, they are often accused of marginalizing women in the fictional roles they assign them.

In the same way, non-western female characters, especially Muslim, are inadequately delineated in works authored by non-Muslim western female writers. One of the main reasons why 'First World' female writers have been incapable of portraying Muslim women satisfactorily is the fact that these writers have not been exposed to what it means to be a female in a 'third world' context (Mohanty, Russo, & Torres, 1991, 325).

Asiya Alam (2015, xiv) argues that "scholarship on non-western societies has contested the very notion of feminism critiquing the naturalizing tendencies of western feminism and the marginalization of third world women". However, it is worth mentioning

that the publication of polemical Muslim-authored works, such as Iqbalunnisa Hussain's *Changing India* (2015) and Nawal El Saadawi's *The Hidden Face of Eve* (1980), has encouraged Muslim feminist efforts to reinterpret previous feminist voices and firmly stand against western marginalization within feminist scholarship. Although the contribution of such works has not been as relevant as it should have been, it has nonetheless marked a turning point in the awakening of women's concerns in the Muslim world. It has also introduced nuanced views of Islam and the relationship between East and West.

As long as the case is not theirs, western non-Muslim female writers cannot deeply feel Muslim women's situation and reflect it with a gratifying degree of accuracy. As Margot Badran wonders, in the course of 'speaking for' and 'speaking about' introduced by Alcoff (1991), "how to support the struggles of others when one cannot claim an ownership in these struggles?" (as cited in Kynsilehto, 2008, 12).

Another important reason is the preconception that many western authors have about Islam as gender-unjust, and the Muslim woman as "the victim of choice during centuries of stagnation and decadence" (Abdullah, 2017, 155; Badran, 2009, 1; Lamrabet, 2016, 1). Such presumption continues today: Muslim women are depicted as helpless and unable to defend themselves and fight for their rights. This preconceived idea consequently renders non-Muslim authors' presentation of Muslim women inaccurate. According to Badran (2009, 1), the West presumes that feminism is non-existent in Muslim societies, because "feminism and Islam is an oxymoron". Due to this, non-Muslim writers cannot possibly conceive that Muslim women should be capable of defending their cause in their works. The way in which some western authors address the status of eastern women, particularly the Muslim, is similar, to a certain degree, to the patriarchal way of dominating women.

In a published interview, Nawal El Saadawi identified the difficulties that she, as a non-white Muslim feminist, underwent in dealing with feminists from the US and Europe. The essential issue about which western and eastern feminists often disagree is the fact that western feminists often fall short of understanding and conceptualizing the variety of religions, cultures and politics of other countries, particularly in the East. Therefore,

western feminists constantly try to dominate eastern feminists and dictate what they should or should not do. El Saadawi severely criticizes American feminists, who think that their feminism is the only valid version of feminism and "that everything American is international and should be the standard of everything" (El Saadawi & Wilmuth, 1995, 441; Golley, 2010, 4). She also attributes her frequent quarrels with western feminists in international conferences to such disagreements, especially when a western activist proposes an idea and urges the rest to adopt the same, regardless of their backgrounds. El Saadawi considers that such acts are "another form of oppression and colonialism", what she labels as "the colonialism of western feminists" (El Saadawi & Wilmuth, 1995, 441).

Similarly, Asma Barlas (2008) has experienced disappointment and repression in her collaborative work with western white feminists. She thinks that there is no freedom at all when emancipation entails a "loss of voice and sense of self for women like [her]" (16). In her justification for rejecting being called a feminist, she writes:

> In part, my resistance was a displacement of frustration with real, live, feminists, all of them white. Although I'm sure they were and remain well-meaning, many of them seemed utterly blind to the racial politics of speaking for women of color like myself and that too in our presence, as if we didn't exist. Anyone who has been silenced in the name of sisterhood can understand how strange and difficult that is and it wasn't until I read black feminists like bell hooks that I could give voice to my discomfort at being seen as the Sister Other. (Barlas, 2008, 17)

Unsatisfied with men's writing and the way in which western writers have introduced them, eastern women have tried their own pens to flesh out their distress. Not only have they employed fiction to render their voices heard, but they have also embarked on writing influential theoretical books. Among their well-known non-fiction works are: Assia Djebar's *Les Enfants du Nouveau Monde* (1962) (translated into English as *Children of the New World* (2005)), Nawal El Saadawi's *Al-Wajh al-'Ari lil-Mar'a al-'Arabiyya* (1977) (translated into English as *The Hidden Face of Eve* (1980)), Fatima Mernissi's *Le Harem Politique: Le Prophète et les Femmes* (1987) (translated into English as *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* (1991)), Amina

Wadud's *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (1999), and Asma Barlas's *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (2019).

The major transition as regards the female condition in the East has finally come as a result of the ruthless efforts made by a group of valiant eastern feminists, who have engraved their names in feminist history. Sherifa Zuhur (2001) states that the twentieth century "witnessed women's transition [. . .] from the harem to corporate and governmental offices", and such a transition has coincided with an overwhelming feminist awakening and an enormous corpus of "serious literature dealing with gender issues" (78). Thus, in their endeavours to introduce a compatible model of feminist activism in their predominantly Muslim communities, eastern authors have institutionalized a Muslim-related way of specifically claiming Muslim women's rights, labeled by some as Islamic feminism.

1.3. Western Feminism vs. Eastern Feminism

In her influential book *Feminisms and Nationalism in the Third World* (2016), Kumari Jayawardena has documented most feminist movements which appeared within Asia and the Middle East, including the Islamic ones. She has located each movement in its local, national and religious context. However, despite the abundant literature written on this in different languages, those who ignore it still believe that feminism is exclusively western.

Moreover, the collective events that resulted in the emergence of the feminist movements, both in the West and the East, prompted many to believe that eastern feminism was the direct outcome of western feminism (Golley, 2010, 27). The fact that western feminism preceded eastern feminism in its emergence and development led many to think that eastern feminism was no more than a copy or mere imitation of what the western liberals had already claimed regarding women's rights. Furthermore, the ways in which western (Eurocentric) feminists wrote contributed, to some extent, to putting eastern feminism in an inferior position, at least from a western perspective. Jayawardena (2016) affirms that feminism is neither an imported product, nor has it been imposed on the East

by the West. Therefore, it is the non-western writers' responsibility to address such issues. She adds:

> In the West, too, there is a Eurocentric view that the movement for women's liberation is not indigenous to Asia or Africa, but has been a purely West European and North American phenomenon, and that where movements for women's emancipation or feminist struggles have arisen in the Third World, they have been merely imitative of western models. (2016, 3)

Another vital factor to either promote or degrade feminisms is the fact that the term 'feminism' itself was coined in the West. It was more often associated with well-off and childless liberal western women, who were defined in terms of their social role, while in conservative eastern societies women were almost exclusively regarded as poor and limited to their 'natural' role of mothers and child-rearers (Riley, 1988, 66). Accordingly, the degradation of eastern feminism does not come out of a vacuum.

Regarding the originality of each feminist movement, Margot Badran (2007), a feminist scholar and historian of the feminist movement in Egypt, explains that feminism is not exclusively western, although the term had originated in the West. In the same way, she adds, feminism is neither French nor American, as both the French and the Americans respectively proclaim. Similarly, Egyptian *Nisa'iya* (the Arabic term for feminism) is neither French nor western. It is Egyptian, as its "founders have attested and history makes clear" (Badran, 2007, 24).

Majid (1998) ascribes the confusion and contention over feminist principles between western and eastern feminists to the environment wherein the discourse of western feminism has been cultivated, especially in reference to "gender relations in Christian capitalist cultures" and the "exhausted paradigms of western social thought" (321-22). Hence, adopting a western feminist platform to deal with eastern women's issues is deemed fruitless, because western feminism mainly studies western history and culture. For eastern feminism to be effective in achieving its objectives, it had to originate in the eastern environment and draw upon its experiences and values.

By the same token, eastern feminism would not have emerged without actual indigenous motivations. Every society has its own history and conventions which, in turn, inspire its people in all the spheres of life. Hence the risk of adopting western feminism as the only theoretical tool to analyze eastern Muslim texts. Such projects can be rather risky, mainly due to the great disparity between western and eastern contexts in domestic, social, political, economic and religious terms.

Zeidan (1995) also thinks that there is an enormous risk in applying western feminist ideas and critical concepts to eastern feminist writing, although she believes that western culture has had an undeniable impact on most aspects of easterners' lives (3). She explains that "the danger lies in imposing these theories indiscriminately on a literature that may have a different historical-cultural context" (1995, 3). However, Zeidan does not call for turning the back on western feminist theories altogether, because such theories can also be employed as valuable analytical instruments to interpret some literary works.

1.4. Islamic Feminism

Islam came at a time when social, political and gender distinctions among people were at their highest. In the Levant, for example, the Roman law was applied at the beginning of the mission of Prophet Mohammed. The Roman law divided people into nobles and slaves; and women were put on the same level as slaves. Only nobles did enjoy civil and political rights, while others were completely deprived of them (Al'laham, 2001, 66). In addition, slavery and sex discrimination were fundamental for the political, social and economic life in the Arab homeland, which was the first and only Islamic community at the time. Nations, including the Arab one, were distinguished by wealth, honour, skin colour, and pride of their fathers, mothers, tribes and races. In such an atmosphere, Islam came to call for equality among all of its people, i.e. between nobles and slaves, white and black, Arabs and non-Arabs, and more significantly between men and women (Al'laham, 2001, 66; Umara, 1985, 62-65). Equality was, and is still, one of the first and most important principles that Islam tried to establish in society through many Qur'anic texts.

> O mankind, We have created you from male and female; and We have made you into tribes and sub-tribes that you may recognize one another. Verily the most

> honorable among you, in the sight of Allah, is he who is the most righteous among you. Surely, Allah is All-Knowing, All-Aware. (Qur'an 49:14)

Whenever they discuss women's condition in Muslim communities, clerics like Nawwabuddin (1987) and El-Sibai (1999) often commence their speech or writing mentioning women's undeniable rights and the privileges Islam has bestowed upon them. Not only do they compare the improved status of Muslim women with the conditions of their mothers in the pre-Islamic era, but they also proudly contrast Muslim women with their counterparts in the Greek and Roman civilizations. Similarly, most Muslim authors have severely criticized the way in which women were treated in the West. They repeatedly point out that Muslim women were enjoying spiritual, social, political, and economic rights under Islamic law centuries before their counterparts in the West were allowed to "own property and enter into contracts in the1800s" (Sidani, 2005, 502).

To go even further, same Muslim writers severely criticize several world philosophies for their degradation and pejorative attitude towards women (El-Sibai, 1999). Abu-Shaqua (1990) and Al-Buti (1996), in their attempts to foreground the high status that Muslim women had for being Muslim, recount stories of Muslim women who played effective roles in their societies. They worked in almost all the vital professions, such as teaching, nursing, agriculture and trade, which shows that Muslim women were equal to men and enjoyed almost the same rights. Most Muslim clerics constantly remind that "Islam gave women all their rights. […] It honours women. […] It has protected them" (Lamrabet, 2016, 1). Yet, at present and in practice, many women continue to be oppressed in the name of Islam.

The rights Muslim women should enjoy are as old as Islam itself. They are not the result of developments, humanitarian revolutions or renewed norms. Actually, the oppression that many Muslim women experience today is the immediate result of accumulated historical developments. Jayawardena (2016) states that eastern women were affected by the "historical circumstances [which] produced important material and ideological changes" (2). In keeping with this, El Saadawi (1980) points out that the situation and problems of Muslim women in contemporary societies are the outcome of

“developments in history that made one class rule over another, and men dominate over women” (i).

In recent years, Islamic feminist writing has unprecedentedly turned into the focal point of intensified scholastic concern, and as a topic of public interest as well. However, feminism in Islam continues to be considered to be the subject of “confusion and contention, and of considerable ignorance, both within and beyond Muslim communities in both the East and West” (Badran, 2009, 1). Although the emergence of Islamic feminism, as a term, took place in the 1990s (Badran, 2007, 24; 2009, 1-9; Kynsilehto, 2008, 9; Rhouni, 2010, 22), it seems that the emancipation of women in the Muslim world was first openly voiced in 1928, when the pioneering Egyptian feminist leader, nationalist, and founder of the Egyptian Feminist Union Huda Shaarawi publically unveiled herself. She announced the beginning of the war against the religiously reinforced traditions and conventions that had kept women as subjugated inferiors in the Arab society, which is the first and largest Islamic community (Cooke, 2006, 568).

Like the first call of women’s liberation in the West and the Middle East, the movement of Islamic feminism faced a great deal of hostility and refusal. Its emergence was considered to be an attempt to westernize conservative eastern society, that is, another kind of invasion on the part of the French and the British. Furthermore, western-made feminism was regarded as a flagrant violation of Islam and its divine laws. According to Jayawardena (2016), when it was first introduced in the third world as a concept, feminism caused too much contention.

> It has variously been alleged by traditionalists, political conservatives and even certain leftists, that feminism is a product of ‘decadent’ western capitalism; that it is based on a foreign culture of no relevance to women in the Third World; that it is the ideology of women of the local bourgeoisie; and that it alienates or diverts women, from their culture, religion and family responsibilities on the one hand, and from the revolutionary struggles for national liberation and socialism on the other. (2016, 2)

In addition to this, Golley (2010) ascribed the birth of feminism in Muslim Arab communities to the "struggle between the dying traditional, religious, feudal Ottoman way of life and the rising modern, secular, capitalist European ways of life" (27). However, viewing feminism in the Muslim Arab world as an imported product or the mere imitation of the western lifestyle only shows absolute ignorance about the changes and indigenous needs of the Muslim society. Feminism, as described by Badran, is a "plant that only grows in its own soil (2007, 24). Thus, it might be argued that Islamic feminism has also emanated from the Qur'an, which is the very source of Islam.

The Muslim world, in particular the Arab countries, witnessed the advent of the theories of native feminists in the late 1970s. In 1973, Hassan al-Turabi, one of the most influential figures in modern Sudanese politics, published his pamphlet *Al-Mara Bayna Ta'alim Al-Din Wa Taqalid Al-Mujtama* (Women between the Teachings of Religion and the Customs of Society), in which he demanded a re-interpretation of Muslim women's rights in the *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) (Al-Turabi, 1973).

Al-Turabi claimed that, in order to render Islamic laws compatible with reactionary traditions and customs, many of these laws were changed so that they could comply with this regressive mentality. The way in which patriarchal jurists interpreted the Qur'an granted males absolute authority over females. As a result, Muslim societies denied women their fundamental rights. Al-Turabi notes:

> Women played a considerable role in public life during the life of the Prophet, and they contributed to the election of the third Caliph. Only afterwards were women denied their rightful place in public life, but this was history departing from the ideal. (1983, 244)

When feminist thoughts were proclaimed by women in a conservative Muslim society, they had a most powerful effect and gave way to much heated contestation. The most prominent feminist ideas were the ones introduced by the universally acclaimed feminist Nawal El Saadawi. The controversial thoughts she boldly presented resulted in a fierce campaign of criticism and death-threats against her. Many critics, especially conservative Muslims like Alafani (2009), accused her of being an atheist who antagonizes

Allah and the Prophet (17). On the contrary, El Saadawi is an Islamic feminist who rigorously censures those who constantly try to steer religion to their own benefit in an attempt to maintain the dominance and power they currently hold. Anne Roald once stated that El Saadawi is a "rejectionist" who is engaged in reforming and reconstructing her religion (as cited in Cooke, 2004, 76).

The most salient points El Saadawi (1977) stresses in her influential book *Al-Wajh al-'Ari lil-Mar'a al-'Arabiyya*are: 1) Not only did Islamic or Arab culture treat women as commodities or slaves, but the western Christian culture was even tougher in this regard. 2) Women's oppression has nothing to do with East or West, neither with religions; it is rather an immediate result of the patriarchal system in all human societies. 3) Women's intellectual abilities are not inferior to men's, as many might think. History tells us that women preceded men in thinking and were the first to use knowledge. 4) Muslim women had had rights in the time of Prophet Mohammed; yet, these rights were extorted from them later. 5) Islamic traditions have many positive aspects which should be looked for, while the negative ones should be bravely left; women's freedom depends primarily on the combination of old and present positive aspects. 6) Women can be emancipated only by becoming a political power, which cannot be achieved without being aware of their own rights and goals (El Saadawi, 1977, 4-5).

In the 1980s, Islamic feminist theories kept on developing, and many Islamic feminists came up with various hypotheses. Each of these feminists, in accordance with the social and cultural traditions of their community, demanded a reconsideration of the interpretation of the Qur'anic texts and Sunnah (Prophet Mohammed's deeds and sayings), with the ultimate aim of regaining Muslim women's rights.

The well-known Iranian feminist Ziba Mir-Hosseini was among the first to use the term *Islamic feminism* in her contribution to the Iranian women's journal *Zanana* (The Woman), which was founded by Shahla Sherkat in 1992. Among other things, Mir-Hosseini (1996) explains that, when Islamists came to power in Iran with the 1979 revolution, they apparently made some room for the discussion of Muslim women's rights in Islam. However, the purpose behind offering women such an opportunity was no other

than ensuring their support of the newly established Islamic revolution, which had just overthrown the Shah's secular rule.

When Muslim women realized that the Islamist government monopolized the way in which Islamic teachings were interpreted and practiced, in both the public and private spheres, they began to look for a way in which they could defend their rights. To achieve this, they relied on the same Qur'an that the Islamist authorities had used to deprive Muslim women's of their basic rights. Mir-Hosseini remarks:

> To what extent and by what means can limitations imposed on women by Sharia [Islamic law] texts be renegotiated? […] a "feminist" re-reading of the Sharia is possible – even becomes inevitable […]. This is so because once the custodians of the Sharia are in power, they have to deal with the contradictory aims set by their own agenda and discourse, which are to uphold the family and restore women to their "true and high" status in Islam. The resulting tension – which is an inherent element in the practice of the Sharia itself, but is intensified by its identification with a modern state – opens room for novel interpretations of the Sharia rules on a scale that has no precedent in the history of Islamic law. (1996, 285-286)

Many Islamic feminist scholars prefer the term *un-interpretation* to *re-interpretation*. The Egyptian feminist and founding member of the Women and Memory Forum, Omaima Abou-Bakr, notes that Islamic feminism is a "continuous attempt to un-interpret past gender biased readings done by male jurists and to offer alternative new perspectives toward justice and equality within Islam itself" (2011, 17). She also affirms that the project of Islamic feminism has offered the opportunity to undo what has been done by patriarchy so far.

Simultaneously with and against such trends, another group of Muslim activists has emerged demanding adherence to traditional interpretations of the Qur'anic texts and Sunnah. They reject the introduction of any extraneous ideas and interpretations so as not to desecrate what they regard as the holiness of Islamic teachings. Such different attitudes towards feminist activism have resulted in the appearance of different feminist movements, which take into consideration the diversity, not only among Muslim societies, but also

among individuals themselves. Using a plural concept of Islamic feminism, according to Badran (2010), can be read as “announcing or suggesting the need to consider the notion of multiple Islamic feminisms” to suit divergent Islamic communities (par. 3).

Despite this disparity, the unanimous position of all Islamic feminist activists is that the coming of Islam established the principles of gender justice and then, over time, the socio-cultural practices that brought about today’s patriarchal system deprived women of their basic rights (Badran, 2007, 28).

Most Muslim feminists, except those who embrace Islamist conservative thoughts, agree that the major vehicle for depriving Muslim women of their rights is the way in which Qur’anic texts have been interpreted and the extraneous meanings attached to Islam. In her discussion of Islamic feminism, individual liberty, equality and legacy, Asma Lamrabet, a famous doctor, Islamic feminist and author, affirms that arguments regarding such issues “will only advance if we review our entire approach to religion. Inheritance is a question, among others, but it will be impossible to understand if one does not deconstruct dogmatic and patriarchal interpretations undermining any Islamic thought” (in Krauska, 2012, par. 4). Therefore, the main concern of most Muslim feminists is to criticize the prevalent patriarchal methods Muslims use in reading the Qur’an, and highlight the egalitarian aspects of the Qur’anic teachings as well.

For Muslims, the methods for interpreting the Qur’an and its hermeneutics are as important as the Qur’an per se. The Qur’an is, for them, the Word of God, which was transferred and clarified to the Muslim community through their prophet’s sayings and deeds. Rahman (1984) remarks that the Qur’an was revealed to the Prophet as a holy text and that presumably “no other religious document is held to be so” (2). Furthermore, the Qur’an itself states that it is an all-inclusive guideline for humanity, and subsumes all previously revealed holy texts as well (Qur'an 6:114, 10:37, 12:111). Rahman (1984) also argues that both the Qur’anic revelation and Prophet Mohammed’s deeds took place for more than twenty two years, and that within that period “all kinds of decisions on policy in peace and in war, on legal and moral issues in private and public life were made in the face

of actual situations" (2). Therefore, the Qur'an is not just a holy text for Muslims, it is also a handbook of good conduct.

In addition, Barlas (2019) expounds that the Qur'an is not limited to a certain group of people in a definite epoch in human history. This would limit its message, which would accordingly "ignore compassion, justice, and mercy for each and every believer of all eras, implying that God is less than all-compassionate and all-knowing" (4). Perceiving the Qur'an in such a way prompted both Muslim jurists and intellectuals to regard it as a "unique repository of answers to all sorts of questions" (Rahman, 1984, 2). Nevertheless, a neutral, clear and easy-to-follow method of interpretation was clearly in demand after Prophet Mohammed's departure. On the basis that there is "no practice without theory" (Belsey, 2002, 3), many schools of Qur'anic hermeneutics appeared. Yet, all of them were monopolized by men**.** This explains why, in order to develop a neutral Islamic hypothesis concerned with reviving the true Islamic principles, advocates of Islamic feminism have been required to employ a "progressive religious hermeneutics" (Abdullah, 2017, 155)

Formerly, Muslims did not firmly address issues of method and hermeneutics. As is reported by Rahman (1984), "medieval systems of Islamic law" functioned quite effectively due to the realism that the old generations displayed. The earlier generations also took the "raw materials for this law from customs and institutions of the conquered lands", altered them in compliance with the Qur'anic teachings where necessary, and integrated them as part of the Islamic teachings (3). The lack of a sufficiently reliable method for interpreting the Qur'an appropriately resulted in the imprecision and imperfection of the tools adopted to derive laws from the Qur'an. As Rahman (1984) claims, there was, on the one hand, no right way to grasp the true essence of the Qur'an because there was no adequate method to follow. On the other hand, there was insistence in interpreting various Qur'anic texts in isolation, which led to enforce laws from certain texts that were by no means legal in intent.

Several Qur'anic verses are open to multiple interpretations, and this has been exploited as a key source for patriarchal practices. The most important verses that reinforce patriarchal domination are the ones encapsulated in anthropomorphic words, which

describe God and classify Him as a masculine figure. When portraying God, Muslim scholars are divided into three main groups. According to Abrahamov (1995), the first group embraces the literal meanings of the anthropomorphic expressions. They believe that, like humans, "God has hands, face, legs and that He sits on His Throne and descends every night to the lowest heaven, and that He is angry or is happy" (365). This is how this is expressed in some Qur'anic texts:

> But whoever kills a believer intentionally - his recompense is Hell, wherein he will abide eternally, and Allah has become angry with him and has cursed him and has prepared for him a great punishment. (Qur'an 4.93)
>
> The Most Merciful [Who is] above the Throne established. (Qur'an 20.5)
>
> And do not invoke with Allah another deity. There is no deity except Him. Everything will be destroyed except His Face. His is the judgment, and to Him you will be returned. (Qur'an 28.88)
>
> "[Allah] said, 'O Iblees [Satan], what prevented you from prostrating to that which I created with My hands? Were you arrogant [then], or were you [already] among the haughty?'" (Qur'an 38.75)

The second group of Islamic scholars is made up by mainly rationalist thinkers, who assume that God is unlike anything.

> The originator of the heavens and the earth, He made for you mates from your own selves, and mates of the cattle, by which means He multiplies you. Nothing is like Him, and He is the All-hearing, the All-seeing. (Qur'an 42.11)
>
> Nor is there to Him any equivalent. (Qur'an 112.4)

They employ a figurative approach to clarify the anthropomorphic expressions. Thus, "God's hand stands for His power and His sitting on the Throne means His rule over the world" (Abrahamov, 1990, 27). As for the third group, these exegetes adopt a midway path, which insists on accepting the Qur'anic text as it is, "without trying to interpret its modality" (Abrahamov, 1995, 365).

Against this background, Barlas (2019) claims that since many of the Qur'anic texts are either anthropomorphic or polysemic, they are susceptible to variant interpretations. She thinks that such texts cannot be properly read and interpreted out of their genuine contexts, because we are unable to figure out why "people have read it in a particular mode or why they tend to favour one reading of it over another" (4).

Similarly, Arkoun (2019) argues that the Qur'an was "ripped from its historical, linguistic, literary, and psychological contexts and then continually recontextualized in various cultures and according to ideological needs of various actors" (7). In line with this, and in an attempt to refute the biased interpretation of some Qur'anic texts which placed women on an inferior status with regard to men, El Saadawi (1997) demonstrates that the Qur'an does not contain any precept against women. In contrast, it can be read from both "feminist and misogynist standpoints, and many positions in between" (as cited in Chambers, 2015, 210-211). Likewise, Barlas also affirms that, like all other texts, the Qur'an can be read in "multiple modes, including egalitarian ones" (2019, 4).

Consequently, it becomes clear that traditions and conventions have played an influential role in modifying the actual meaning of the Qur'anic texts, particularly the ones that are concerned with Muslim women's status in society. This is why al-Turabi, in his *Tajdeed al-Fikr al-Islami* (The Renewal of the Islamic Thinking) (1993), called upon a contemporary interpretation of the Qur'an. He argued that "every Qur'anic exegesis in the past has reflected the spirit of its time" (as cited in El-Affendi, 2006, 149).

The Arabic term for exegesis is *tafsir*, which means to explain, disclose or expound. Therefore, *tafsir* is supposed to help people, particularly Muslims, to perceive and understand the Will of God, which was conveyed to them by the Qur'an through His prophet Mohammed. What al-Turabi consequently appealed to is a new exegesis that is based on freedom of research, and is devoid of all the historical, cultural and socio-political restrictions that have distorted the actual meaning of the Qura'nic texts through the process of decontextualization as referred to by Arkoun (2019). In al-Turabi's words, "what we need is to go back to the roots, and create a revolution at the level of principles" (2001, 127).

On the other hand, Raja Rhouni (2008) criticizes the "essentializing tendencies", which have so often been employed to conceptualize Islamic feminism. She contends that Islamic feminist scholarship should move beyond 'foundationalism towards 'post-foundationalist' Islamic feminist hermeneutics (103). To put it differently, we ought to transcend the process of searching for truth and authenticity to engage the historical, cultural and socio-political aspects in the Islamic feminist thought. Like Rhouni, Kynsilehto (2008) takes it that there is a need to go into a "dialogue with the tradition and applying contextual approach in order to expand the methodologies of exegesis, rather than undermining foundations and traditions" (13).

I believe that such a disparity in thoughts and approaches concerning the Qur'an and its exegesis is quite natural; it is undeniable that discrepancy in views and the ways in which religion and traditions should be practiced exists in Muslim societies. Moreover, as long as religion and traditions keep on having a huge impact on their social and political lives, Muslim people are in urgent need of script-related analytical framework so that they can achieve some sort of gender equality while observing traditional peculiarities within their different societies.

Taking all the things so far said into account, it can be concluded that Islamic feminism is one of the many theological feminist movements that have emerged in different religions, such as Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism and Hinduism, to mention some of the most important. However, academic interest in Islamic feminism appears to be greater, since Islam is frequently alleged to be the most misogynist religion and in complete contradiction to feminism. I also take it that the increasing interest in Islamic feminism, especially in Muslim societies, is the result of the tiny room allowed for feminism to be practiced in such conservative societies. This, in turn, has pushed Muslim women activists to look for more suitable alternatives to transform their communities, where Islam is mostly practiced in a way that antagonizes western feminist movements. In my opinion, what authenticates and lends more weight to Muslim feminists' theories is the fact that they stem from the very religious source which patriarchy has used to manipulate, dominate and restrain women.

1.4.1. Multi-Islamic Feminism

Generally speaking, Islamic feminism can be said to fall into three major categories, each of which corresponds with the positions embraced by its champions. The first group of Islamic feminists includes those who advocate to re-read and/or re-interpret the Qur'an and other religious texts from a feminine perspective. It is also called "gender-sensitive reading" (Badran, 2007; Schneider, 2009, 56; Webb, 2000). Leila Ahmed and Iqbalunnisa Hussain are among the well-known Muslim feminists who advocate such views. The second group can be called the secular (sometimes liberal) Muslim feminists, as its main activists, notably Nawal El Saadawi and Alia Mamdouh, favour and support secular ideas. Their feminist views are similar to those of the western feminist agenda, although they severely criticize western feminism for certain reasons (Abdullah, 2017, 155; Badran, 2007, 27; Schneider, 2009, 56). They call for a contemporary reading of the religious texts in which traditions and conventions are to be totally discarded. As regards the third group, they are the Islamist or traditionalist feminists, who stand against any kind of reformist agenda (Abdullah, 2017, 155; Schneider, 2009, 56). They are happy to live within the patriarchal system which, as they see it, "offers them protection in return for their obedience" (Badran, 2007, 13). According to Al-Mughni (2010), Islamist feminists have embraced the same position of their male counterparts. They believe that "social cohesion and cultural authenticity" are ensured by following "religious idioms and norms" (Al-Mughni, 2010, 167).

In her book *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of Postmodern Analysis*, Hiadeh Moghissi (1999) affirms that many Muslims across the Middle East believe that Islam is a liberatory project. It is undeniable that Islam has been exploited as a form of political expression, and that many Islamists have lost their Islamic militancy on account of the fact of feeling betrayed by a number of Islamists' promises. However, a lot of other Islamists still think that conformity to the sacred texts, a revitalized Shari'a [Islamic laws], and the rule of Muslim jurists should appeal to the disenfranchised masses as the only hope for meaningful change in their lives. Such a position is still vigorously supported by Islamist feminists like Shelina Zahra Janmohamed and Leila Aboulela. Their stance did not wane over time, as they truly believe that they are engaged in the process of "redefining

the role of women in an Islamic society" with a view to achieving Muslim females' empowerment (Al-Mughni, 2010, 167).

On the contrary, Asma Barlas and other Muslim feminists, such as Amina Wadud, Azizah el-Hibri and Riffat Hassan, have totally broken with the dominant Muslim juristic and exegetical tradition in their re-interpretation of the Qur'an (Barlas, 2016, 111). Barlas (2016) claims that this 1400-year-old tradition is not only "normatively patriarchal", but that it also projects an "ideology of male supremacy onto the Qur'an" as it offers males certain rights over women, particularly when they are in their husbands' role (111). For her part, Fatima Mernissi (1991) criticizes the way in which sacred texts of the Qur'an have been manipulated. She believes that this manipulation is a "structural characteristic of the practice of power in Muslim societies", and that the powerful position bestowed on men, from the seventh century on, was "only legitimated by religion, political forces and economic interests pushed for the fabrication of false traditions" (Mernissi, 1991, 9).

In keeping with this, Wadud (1999) also comments that "no method of Qur'anic exegesis is fully objective". Subjective choices are commonly expected to be made by all exegetes. She also adds that some details of the exegetes' interpretations "reflect their subjective choices and not necessarily the intent of the text" (1). In her book *Islamic Feminism: Current Perspectives*, Kynsilehto (2008) elaborates on the paternalistic interpretation of the Qur'anic texts and the tendentious meaning attributed to its expressions. She states that Muslim women activists who oppose paternalistic readings of the Qur'an have clearly shown that "it is not the texts themselves but rather their interpretations that have allowed for patriarchal traditions to persist" (10).

Regardless of their divergent approaches, all Muslim feminists agree to the fact that Qur'anic principles laid the ground for social justice, which prevailing patriarchal traditions eventually did their best to distort (Cooper, 2018, 27-28). For Asma Barlas (2019, 2005, 2008, 2016), Amina Wadud (1999, 2006), Asghar Ali Engineer (2005) and Farid Esack (Esack, 1991, 1993, 2003), the Qur'an is at the core of their reformist exegeses. They all think that the Qur'an ought to be the main criterion to shape Muslims' understandings and practices (Rahemtulla, 2017, 220). "Islam is a comprehensive, integrated way of life"

Hasan Al-Turabi correspondingly comments (1983, 241). In line with this, in an interview with Rahemtulla, Barlas affirms:

> I think the Qur'an is the starting point and the ending point. Just like the Names of God: God is the First and God is the Last. So if the Qur'an is God's Word, then it is the First and it is the Last. It has to provide the framework, the yardstick, the touchstone in terms of which we formulate law or norms or anything else. (Rahemtulla, 2017, 166)

In an interview with Amat al-Aleem Alsoswa, the Yamani first female ambassador and minister of human rights, journalist, activist and researcher, Badran asked her whether she had ever seen any conflict between Islam and women's rights and dignity, and this was the answer she got:

> None at all. As a matter of fact, quite the opposite. I found Islam calling for the right of every human being to the full enjoyment of their humanity. I found Islam encouraging acceptance of other religions and cultures and affirming that differences do not make you superior or inferior to others. You are equal to others and they are equal to you. For many people this is difficult to absorb but in our family it was simply something we lived with. (Badran & Cooke, 2004, 400)

Likewise, the target that Amina Wadud seeks in her feminist endeavour is to "transform Islam through its own egalitarian tendencies, principles, articulations, and implications into a dynamic system with practices that fulfill its goals of justice" (2006, 2). Although the main focus of Wadud's feminist activism is similar to that of Barlas, Mernissi, Badran and others, she distinguishes her approach by setting the Qur'an as the spiritual guideline toward the ultimate peace that she favours over prosperity in the public and private domains.

> I used to feel that my goal in this struggle was to experience well-being in both the public and private domains of human existence; through interaction with Islamic historical developments, intellectual and practical, and in the context of change and challenge. I have come to ascertain that well-being is a spiritual consequence of the

> process and participation. It is not the goal. Indeed, when it becomes the goal, it is often lost. The Qur'an does not promise us a life of ease, while it does give indications of how to live a life of struggle and surrender in order to achieve peace and beauty here on earth as a movement toward the Ultimate. (2006, 7-8)

Thus, as has been asserted by Barlas (2006, 2008), Muslim activists do not have to exclusively refer to feminism in order to challenge patriarchal authority. Keeping religion away from tradition and patriarchal manipulation is often enough to ensure social justice. This can also be the reason why some of the main Muslim feminist activists, such as Barlas and Mernissi, are reluctant to be identified as Islamic feminists. When terms widely used by feminists in the West, such as anti-patriarchal, sexual inequality and women's liberation are circulated in conservative Muslim societies, they often met opposition and fuel public resentment, particularly when they are seen as questioning the holy Qur'an (Barlas, 2019, xii). In a recent study concerned with Muslim females' activism, Barlas also stresses that western feminist terms must be cautiously employed when it is necessary to "differentiate and privilege […] a Qur'anic viewpoint" (2019, xii). She believes that imposing the western kind of feminism on Muslim women's activism denies the "specificity, autonomy, and creativity of their thought". It also reinforces the false impression that "there is no room from within Islam to contest inequality or patriarchy" (xii).

Amina Wadud and Riffat Hassan's main concern today is that their work should be understood regardless of the way in which it is labeled (Badran, 2007, 26). On the other hand, some other Muslim feminist scholars, such as Margot Badran, have asserted their Islamic feminist identity from the very beginning. They believe that for "descriptive and analytical purposes" it is necessary to mark their activism with a unique name, i.e. *Islamic feminism*, to be clearly distinguished from other feminist movements (Badran, 2005, 15; 2007, 26-28). The term Islamic feminism also signifies the endeavours of religiously engaged intellectuals and their struggle on behalf of Muslim women and their rights. According to Cooke, Islamic feminism describes Muslims' "speech, action, writing, or way of life engaged with questioning Islamic epistemology as an *expansion* of their faith position and not a *rejection* of it" (2000, 151, emphasis in original).

Muslim feminists do not only differ as regards the labels with which they would like to be identified, but they also diverge in the handling of some issues and the sources on which they support their propositions. As to the second reliable religious texts, *el ahadith* (plural of *hadith*, the oral report from the Prophet Mohammed), both Barlas and Mernissi argue that many of the inserted and/or decontextualized *el ahadith* are false testimonies that insist on claiming that Prophet Mohammed said and did such and such. This false testimony would, in turn, “legitimate such an act or such an attitude” (Mernissi, 1991, 9). Mernissi goes on to argue that “in this conjuncture of political stakes and pressures, religious discourse swarmed with traditions that legitimated certain privileges and established their owners in possession of them” (9). This is why Barlas and Mernissi oppose adopting *el ahadith* as a reliable source of legislation without investigating its authenticity and understanding their genuine contexts and the reasons why they were formulated. Conversely, Amina Wadud (2006) calls on and encourages Muslim feminist scholars to pay more attention to the re-interpretation of *el ahadith* in their attempts to form “gender-inclusive perspectives” (7).

I think that the variety of Muslim theorists’ positions, which led to the emergence of different hues of Muslim-related feminism, does by no means undermine the Muslim scholars’ main concern, namely, to pursue an egalitarian society able to draw its principles from the Qur’an. It rather signals the formation of an inclusive framework which can be differently applied in different Muslim communities. Diversity within the Muslim feminist movements on the whole enhances their general framework, which thus becomes more inclusive, just like global feminism, which aims to include many trends and theories that complement one another. According to Moghissi, most feminist views, ideologies and concepts have come together to make up an inclusively big umbrella in the 1990s.

> Today, feminism has grown large and includes many brands, both conservative and radical, religious and atheist, heterosexual and non-heterosexual, white and non-white, issue-oriented and holistic, individualistic and community-oriented; and feminists hail from the North and the South. So the question, whether we can affirm a new brand of feminism which is self-identified or identified by others as ‘Islamic feminism’, is rather superfluous. (1999, 125)

Not only is there in the Muslim world a close connection among feminisms, but this can also be appreciated all over the world. Each feminist movement inspires and improves the other. Thus, the religious approach of Muslims' feminism is not confined to issues related to pious Muslims only. It rather represents an integral part of the global feminist paradigm that should be taken into consideration wherever religion is practiced.

This diversity should also warn against any kind of typecasting. In order to avoid "stereotyping and pigeon-holing" when dealing with women's writing (Amireh, 1996, par. 20), diversified Muslim feminist theories should be used to analyze Muslim feminist works produced in different Muslim societies. In this way, non-Muslim readers, who are unfamiliar with different Muslim contexts, will be exposed to a variety of modes, and will listen to dissimilar voices emanating from divergent traditional and socio-political contexts. Each of these Muslim tongues, in turn, tries to articulate Muslim women's plight in accordance with the context out of which women live and strive for their rights. In lieu of stereotypical representations of Muslim women, vivid images from divergent communities will be introduced. At the same time, an inclusive representation of Muslim women and their struggle for equality makes it easier for Muslim and non-Muslim critics to compare with, differentiate from and/or bring Islamic feminism and other global feminisms closer to one another.

Moreover, examining women's literary production in different Muslim communities while identifying their adopted strategies, techniques and ways of coping with oppression will contribute to a better understanding of the patriarchal mechanisms at work in the writers' immediate contexts. Additionally, such understanding will provide an inclusive view of social, political, economic and class-specific aspects according to which women are categorized within their respective communities. In this respect, it also appears that cultural identity and social class have some crucial and immediate impact, not only on gender power dynamics, but also on social relationships in general. Carrying out analyses based primarily on a variety of Muslims' feminist theories will inevitably reveal how male and female adjust, oppose, and clash with one another over rights, duties, economic resources and social status.

According to Kandiyoti (1988), analyzing women's strategies in a systematic way dissolves some of the "artificial divisions" which seem evident in theoretical debates over the "relationships among class, race, and gender" (285). She also points out that the strategies employed by both men and women are shaped by "several levels of constraints" (285). In other words, women's coping mechanisms are developed in accordance with definite patriarchal constraints that define, modulate and restrict their domestic, social, political, economic and religious options.

1.4.2. Inapplicability of Western Feminism

Since its early emergence as a formal movement, western feminism set certain borders which included some women while excluding others. Although western feminism witnessed remarkable changes and developments, the influence of its first assumptions, as represented by its first wave in particular, continued to differentiate some women's experiences as emancipatory and others' as patriarchal. Despite the fact that the main aim of western feminism was to bring about social, political and economic change in women's lives in general, it failed to meet the needs of some, particularly the Muslim. According to Sara Salem (2013), all western feminist movements have faced real difficulties in "engaging with women who are religious" (1). The major reason why western feminism did not succeed among Muslim women is that it sees Islam as an inherently patriarchal religion that excludes women and renders them inferior to men.

Muslim feminists, on the other hand, cling to their Islamic identity, and this raises significant questions as to whether western feminism is able to accommodate Islamic feminist orientations within its project. One of the main disagreements between western and Muslim feminists is the question of judgment. Muslim feminists claim that western feminists do not have the right to decide that Islam is oppressive to women as long as they do not have enough knowledge about it. Without an adequate understanding of the role of Islam, it is hard, if not impossible, to fully apprehend the dynamics of Muslim women's social, political and economic status.

Elina Vuola (2001) argued that social and literary studies about religion and women are more often guided by two "opposite stereotypes" (1). On the one hand, there has been a kind of resistance, or blindness towards the significance of religion to women.

As was mentioned above, religion has many positive aspects, and for many Muslim feminists it is a liberatory project per se. Ignoring this inevitably makes it very difficult to handle the subject of Muslim women and their autonomy in a balanced way. It also provokes negative attitudes towards Islam on the part of western feminists.

More often than not, secular and/or non-Muslim feminists only look at Muslim women through the lens of the Islamic paradigm. Vuola (2001) also states that non-Muslim feminists who deny or are blind to the significance and weight of their own religion may view Islam as "the almost sole signifier of women's lives in certain countries" (1). Stereotypical interpretations of Muslim women very negatively affected the relationship and cooperation between Muslim and non-Muslim feminists. It also had a very bad impact on feminism and women studies in general.

According to Jose Casanova (1994), western feminists neglect Islamic values because they believe that secularization has won over religion in modern societies. However, the secularization that they have predicted has mainly taken place in the western world. Although people started relying on their independent judgment and refraining from believing in absolute truths, religion continues to play an important role in the lives of many people, as they see it as a path "toward wisdom because it teaches virtue and instills fear of punishment" (Mack, 2005, 435). Mack (2005) finally concludes that "religion posits an authority higher than the individual" (435).

In many non-western communities, religious traditions are considered to be unassailable and unchangeable. This, in turn, deprives the masses of any means to transcend prevailing religious barriers. According to Elina Vuola (2001), in contemporary Muslim communities religion is often seen as an immutable system that refrains Muslims' decision-making power and possibilities for change. In contrast, the philosophical and jurisprudential concept of the separation of church and state have generally been taken for granted in the West.

Since the inception of feminism up to the present, too much ink has been spilled by western writers to try to better understand and overcome the problem of women's oppression. Meanwhile, Muslim feminists on the other side of the globe have set out to

(re)consider the issues of women's status and the feminist discourse in their society with a view to keeping up with recent developments in feminist movements. Both Muslim and non-Muslim writers, with widely divergent backgrounds and interests, have attempted to deal with the problem of women's oppression. However, their endeavours have been separately conducted. To put it differently, Muslim and non-Muslim writers have been writing within the political, historical, religious and traditional frameworks of their own societies, and this is why they have approached the subject differently. Thus, there has been an apparent lack of dialogue between Muslim and non-Muslim feminists, mainly because Islam is not known by secular feminists, in particular the western ones.

Moreover, some communities have witnessed the rise of social, religious and traditional fundamentalism, which have consequently forged feminist and political alliances among certain communities (Hawley, 1999). If western feminism has been unable to adequately analyze and consider such a phenomenon by seriously taking into account women's religious concerns, it cannot understand the complex, and sometimes contradictory, relationship between Muslim women and their religious and traditional beliefs.

In other words, if western feminists cling to secularization as the only path for everybody to follow, and continue to look at religion only as an oppressive institution, they will keep themselves within the same "polarized framework characterizing the most conservative sectors of different religious traditions" (Vuola, 2001, 4). Taking such a negative position towards Islam, western feminists leave no space for critical dialogue because they constantly look at Muslims as inherently submissive, awkward and wrong. In order that western feminism can be of use in Islamic contexts, a nuanced and comprehensive feminist understanding of the interplay of Muslim women and their religious traditions is required.

As was mentioned above, Muslim feminists have carried out much research to adequately re-interpret the Qur'an and other Islamic texts. To bring closer their divergent views, the western feminist perspective should also include Muslim feminists' scholarship in its different hues. It should also be cautious when judging Islam by relying on different

Muslim feminist voices. To sum up, despite the recently increasing interest in Muslim women's activism, western feminists' perspective on Muslim women is still problematic, as it creates tension and prevents feminism from becoming an all-inclusive paradigm. This incompatibility between western and Islamic feminist views is basically generated by western prejudice and the constant reproduction of Islam as inherently patriarchal and oppressive to women. A change of attitude would definitely contribute to enforcing and expanding women's cause all over the world.

Chapter 2

2.1. Indo-Anglian Novel and the Contribution of Muslim Indian Novelists

Muslim women in India, like most other Muslim women, have always been in an inferior position to men. They act within religious and traditional frameworks that often induce them to take pride in conducting all the concomitant duties and seek satisfaction in serving male members of their families at the expense of themselves. Their contact with the world, outside the family, is usually conducted through their male first-degree relatives, usually their husbands. It was when Indian women began to think independently and embarked on pursuing their own dreams that their societies attempted to hamper any possible progress that might serve their cause. Nonetheless, their struggle against patriarchy, in particular through the fiction written by Muslim Indian females, has contributed a significant transformation in their lives. Their literary production has shaken the religious and traditional frameworks which had for so long determined their lives. It has also modified women's position and the way they are presented and looked at in literature.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, the acquisition of knowledge in general, and English in particular, very much depended on political, religious and gender-specific factors. As for Indian Muslim women, most of them were educated in the vernacular languages, such as Arabic, Urdu and Persian. These languages contributed to conforming Muslim identity, and in turn testified to the power that this community had in India. In this regard, Muslims first spurned English, until some Muslim dynamic reformists "galvanized public opinion among Muslims in favor of English" (Shamsie, 2015, 3). However, when it came to women's education, the arguments that these reformists put forward "focused more on what and how much they should be taught, rather than whether they should be taught in English" or any of the Islam related languages (Mukherjee, 2000, 19). Despite all the restrictions, widespread illiteracy and the limited use of English in the Indian Muslim communities, some Muslim Indian women decided to write in English.

The fanning out of migrants in the English-speaking countries, prompted by more accesible travel facilities and electronic media availability, also triggered the production of

Indian literature written in English. Moreover, English became widely used by the Indian elite as “a means of advancement and employment and of communication with colonial rulers”. Thus, Indian activists and reformers advocated the use of English as they considered it a “window to new ideas, new technologies and progress” (Shamsie, 2015, 3). Muslim female activists, for their part, also tried to prove themselves and publically declared that they would no longer lag behind their male counterparts. They maintained their position in the gamut of world literature, particularly in the genre of fiction, and their substantial contribution also enriched Indian literature written in English.

Anglophone Indian fiction grew at the very end of the nineteenth century and first quarter of the twentieth. However, it remained a rarity during the first half of the twentieth century, particularly as regards works written by Muslim female novelists (Shamsie, 2015, 5). The development and expansion of such a genre is considered by some as a response to both the existing social and political turmoil in the country and the Gandhian impact on Indian literature in particular. It can also be argued that the encounter with the colonizer was highly responsible for the birth and evolution of Indian fiction in English.

Besides, it is worth mentioning that, although most contemporary novels were written in reaction to Gandhi’s call for socio-political reforms, as is confirmed by Kishwar (1985) in her article “Gandhi on Women”, Indian Muslim novelists chose to focus on the transformation of the Indian Muslim woman instead of recounting the main national events. The emergence of a host of female novelists, such as Attia Hosein, Iqbalunnisa Hussain and Zeenuth Futehally, paved the way for a new orientation in the writing of fiction in English (Das, 2005, 289; Mishra, 2006, 47). In addition to the prevailing political hue of their works, the fiction by these female writers showed a distinct feminist attitude that highlighted Indian women’s experience. In other words, their fiction was more centered on Indian women’s plight than on any other socio-political issues.

Like most literary works at the time, Iqbalunnisa Hussain’s novel *Purdah and Polygamy: Life in an Indian Muslim Household* (1944), to give but one example, was perceived as a consequence of the liberal atmosphere that permeated the nation when Gandhian thoughts were introduced. As a matter of fact, such works were so influential

that they had a ripple effect in the Muslim community, and within the zenana (women's quarters) in particular. In the pre-independence period, Anglophone literary works by Indian Muslim women did not only reflect Muslim women's knowledge of literature and the English language, but they also enriched the Indian literary panorama with a new kind of writing. Although the number of Muslim female writers might have been scarce, and their influence smaller than that of their Hindu counterparts, they nonetheless occupied a distinguished position among Indian female novelists. Among the most influential Muslim novelists were Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Attia Hosain and Iqbalunnisa Hussain.

Their Muslim male counterparts, such as Aamir Ali, Ahmed Ali and K. A. Abbas, to mention but some of the most well-known, mostly wrote about contemporary and most pressing matters in relation to partition, colonialism, freedom and Muslim-Hindu riots. In contrast, Iqbalunnisa Hussain and her female contemporaries did not delve into the issues which afflicted their society. Their works chiefly concentrated on Muslim women, their domestic condition, purdah, polygamy and their relationship with men. This explains why no national events are mentioned in Hussain's aforementioned novel, in spite of the fact that it was written in the most critical period of Indian history. Other interesting contemporary novels were K. A. Abbas's *Tomorrow is Ours* (1943) and Humayun Kabir's *Men and Rivers* (1945). These novels also narrated "typical Indian life, its frustration and aspirations" (Das, 2005, 289).

It seems to some critics that Muslim Indian novelists, such as Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Iqbalunnisa Hussain, Attia Hussain and Comelia Sorabji, who rose to celebrity and won international recognition, were mainly influenced and inspired by British novelists when writing their works. Mishra (2006, 1), for example, states that in the art of "characterization and portrayal of the psychic mind of women" these Indian Muslim writers resembled, to a great extent, Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters, George Eliot, Dorothy Richardson, Mrs. Gaskell and Virginia Woolf. Yet, British influence was limited to art and device rather than content. This critic goes on to affirm that, like British writers, Indian female novelists surpassed their male counterparts both "qualitatively and numerically" when they explored the inner mind of women and asserted their own identity, and distinguished themselves in the main themes they put forward in their works. The miserable

conditions of Indian Muslim women, who struggled to assert themselves in conservative traditional communities, were the main axis around which their fictional works revolved.

Although most of the previously mentioned writers received their education in western institutions and were well versed in western literary trends and narrative forms, their literary works were not a mere imitation and/or recreation of western literature, as many might think. Their fictional works drew their impact from the authors' talent and ability to "use and transform the expectations of such narrative genres as the *Bildungsroman* in specific response to the demands of India in the thirties and forties" (Berman, 2013, 206, emphasis in original).

Among the earliest feminists, educationalists, activists, social reformers and outstanding writers of the 1920s and 1930s, whose works severely criticized the concept and practice of male supremacy in Muslim societies, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain could be mentioned (1880-1932). Like most Muslim women who were fortunate to have a chance to learn, Rokeya received a traditional education in Arabic, Urdu and Persian. However, with her husband's support, she taught herself English, and her writings contributed to the improvement of Muslim women's conditions in the 1920s (Shamsie, 2015). In 1905, she wrote "Sultana's Dream", her first and only short story and best-known piece of writing originally written in English.

Iqbalunnisa Hussain followed the steps of this pioneer when she wrote *Purdah and Polygamy: Life in an Indian Muslim Household* with a view to improving Muslim women's lives. Hussain's works can be generally considered to be a resumption of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's attack of the purdah system, polygamy and other traditional practices severely imposed on Muslim women in the name of religion. Iqbalunnisa Hussain questioned the traditional, conservative and fundamentalist practices imposed on both elite and low-class Muslim women. Her novel encouraged Muslim cultivated women to discard purdah, reject polygamous marriage and take an active part in the socio-political life of the nation. It also showcased the domestic lives of Muslim Indians in the light of modernity and its impact on the Indian community in general. In an extremely conservative society like that of Indian

Muslims, *Purdah and Polygamy* was viewed as one of the most striking fictional works of its time.

2.2. Iqbalunnisa Hussain: The Indian Jane Austen

"Little known to fame" (Reddy, 2018, i), South Asian Muslim author Iqbalunnisa Hussain was born in Chikkaballapur, near Bangalore, on the 21st of January 1900. She belonged to a well-known Muslim family. Her father, Gulam Mohinuddin Khan, an educated man, was appointed Deputy Commissioner of Police, a job that provided security for all family members in general and females in particular. He admired British culture and was rather European as regards his outlook on life. Her mother, Zaibunnisa, was a descendant of Tipu Sultan, the ruler of the Kingdom of Mysore who ardently fought for India's independence (Allana, 1988, 78). Iqbalunnisa's parents offered her some liberty and did not object to her learning and acquiring some knowledge.

In her foreword to *Changing India: A Muslim Woman Speaks*, her daughter Salima Ahmed wrote about her: a "simple village girl" whose education before marriage was "a smattering of Arabic and Urdu" (Ahmed, 2015, vii). In 1914, Iqbalunnisa, who stood sturdily against early marriage in her works, was married at the age of fourteen. Her husband, Sayed Ahmed Hussain, was an engineering student at the University of Bombay. They were very happy in their marital life due to their shared visions, rapport and intellectual thinking. Since she showed interest in learning English, her husband helped and encouraged her to read and write in this language (Spiers, 1940, viii). In 1922, she lived away from her husband as she was admitted to do her undergraduate studies at Maharani College in Mysore, a state she deeply admired. She lived there with her son Bashiruzaman.

According to Rathod (2005), Hussain made a crucial decision to take off the purdah in 1931. It was a rather daring venture, as all people in her conservative community were against this, which they considered to be a flagrant violation of Islam and its teachings. As a consequence, many articles were written against her. She was accused of trying to spoil the conservative Muslim society. Some were even tougher and demanded that she should

be burnt alive. However, she did not budge on her beliefs. Her husband, who shared her intellectual inclinations, stood sturdily by her side (Rathod, 2005, 208).

In 1933, she travelled to England accompanied by her eldest son, leaving behind five other children in Bangalore with her liberal husband, who helped her to pursue her dream to acquire higher education. She embarked on a journey from the city of Colombo to England to study at Leeds University. It should be noted that, till the very end of the nineteenth century, such journeys were regarded as a violation of acceptable norms, particularly in very conservative Muslim communities.

Once in England, she joined the expanding league of Indian women, who were moving there in growing numbers since the very beginning of the twentieth century. According to Alam (2015, xvi), Hussain's journey to study there revealed the "growing strength of diasporic communities in Britain, and greater cultural exchanges facilitated by connections of colonialism". Like Nawal El Saadawi, living and studying in a western society offered Hussain the chance to closely experiment the freedom that non-Muslim western women enjoy. Such experiences and achievements, in turn, sharpened Hussain's insights and plans to uplift her Muslim society in general and women's conditions there in particular.

Once in Britain, not only did Iqbalunnisa Hussain get her MA in Education, but she also contributed to the public discourse on women's rights, specifically their right to receive proper education. By the time she finished up her studies, Hussain had given birth to seven children. When she returned home, she was the first Indian Muslim woman from Karnataka to have graduated at Leeds University (Kirmani, 2018, par. 1). She pursued her campaign there to serve the cause of Muslim women. Due to her relevant contribution, Hussain was revered as a pioneering Muslim feminist and educationalist.

Unfortunate poor Muslim women and those who were in pain and trouble were her main concern. Such women often came up to seek her help and sympathy. In return, she saved no effort to help them, thus embodying the really honorable Muslim way. She talked to their fathers, brothers and husbands, doing her best to make peace between them. Hussain also established extensive relations with the most important people in the country,

such as Lord and Lady Baden-Powell (Chief Guide for Britain), Pearl Buck (Nobel Laureate in Literature), and Lady Astor (the first female MP) (Ahmed, 2015, vii).

She was welcomed by personalities and organizations in India. According to Ahmed, she was “the most unpretentious and humble person possible” (2015, vii). Both Hussain’s life and her feminist ideas substantiated that the struggle for women’s liberation was neither a recent phenomenon nor a western product. It was rather an indigenous demand that had a long national history (Kirmani, 2018, par. 1).

Hussain published many essays in English in an attempt to improve Indian Muslim society. They were compiled in a book, entitled *Changing India: A Muslim Woman Speaks* and published in 1940. In it, she wrote about her observations and experiences on both British and Indian societies. Although the contribution she made with this publication left a mark in literature and politics, it was not given the prominence it deserved. As Salima Ahmed, Hussain’s daughter, often said, a prophet is seldom appreciated at home. She believed that even the intellectuals of her own community failed to realize her mother’s “sterling character and work” (Ahmed, 2015, vii).

Changing India can also be regarded as the genesis of her novel *Purdah and Polygamy: Life in a Muslim Household,* which would be published four years later (Azfar, 2015, par. 2; Kirmani, 2018, par. 1). It was deemed by Jessica Berman as “one of the most striking narratives of its period”, because almost no novel written in English and published in India had had a “better claim to become famous than Mrs. Iqbalunnisa Hussain’s *Purdah and Polygamy*” (Berman, 2013, 216; Reddy, 2018, i). However, like *Changing India,* her only novel did not receive much critical attention when it first appeared, and there is still a long way to go to do it the justice it deserves.

2.2.1. *Purdah and Polygamy* and the Muslim Woman’s Status

Purdah and Polygamy: Life in a Muslim Household, originally published in Bangalore in 1944, is regarded as the first full-length feminist novel written in English by a Muslim woman before the Partition (Berman, 2018, 10). This book can also be seen as the English version of the feminist Urdu fiction written by influential novelists, such as Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932), Ismat Chughtai (1915–1991) and Rashid Jahan

(1905-1952). It launches a scathing attack against the conventional systems of purdah and polygamy, wherein men are treated as the “representative[s] of God on earth”, while women, who have been deprived of a proper education and other basic rights, were relegated to the status of “chattel” (Hussain, 2018, 49). In this novel, Hussain ironically brought to light the corrupting influence of the patriarchal social system and its leverage under the pretext of religion to keep women under its domination.

Hussain stripped Indian women of purdah to expose their suffering in a conservative society that kept them helpless and trapped by traditional religious values, which resulted in their suffocating enslavement. In *Purdah and Polygamy*, Hussain drew the silken curtain of purdah to “unmark the agonized mind of house wives living like encaged birds in the orthodox Muslim families” (Prasad, 2006, 51). Her novel explored in detail the negative consequences of purdah, and how lethally this affected the lives of those women who were obligated to observe it.

Hussain did her best to highlight the evil practices of traditions and conventions which enslaved Muslim women and rendered them voiceless. Not only did she bring to light Muslim women’s reaction to such practices, but she also celebrated their endurance. She wrote authoritatively on the ills of contemporary society and the suffering of Muslim females. Reading Hussain’s novel is like drawing a curtain and opening the door of the zenana (women’s quarters) in order to tell real stories from within. It is like wrapping oneself up in purdah and experiencing the brunt of polygamous practices. Hussain contributed a marvelous picture of Muslim Indian society, with a special focus on women’s condition, marital relationships and customs. This book, in fact, offers a fly-on-the-wall portrait of Muslim women life within the zenana. As its title suggests, *Purdah and Polygamy* tends to “have a mimetic, sociological orientation” (Amin, 2005, 31)

This *novel* can also be regarded as an overt challenge to domestic patriarchal ideologies and the distorted perception of Islam and its rules, particularly the observation of rigorous purdah and the unreflective advocacy of plural marriage. Such a challenge emanates from the author’s ironic narrative tone and the range of female perspectives that the novel describes.

According to Hubel (2015), Hussain's novel was written when middle-class women demanded equal treatment both at home and in public. In this context, *Purdah and Polygamy* became an eloquent expression of Indian women's demands. It provided vivid images of urban life in India, specifically in the Muslim community and from the point of view of its female members. It exhibited a miniature society in which Muslim women from different social classes lived together and shared the same husband in a polygamous marriage. The symbolic element that Hussain introduced in her novel to encapsulate Muslim women's life is the zenana, which is described as "complex, difficult to pin down, because it is subtle in both its expression and its implications" (Hubel, 2015, 2). Yet, as was argued before, such an influential novel, like many other novels penned by South Asian female novelists, was largely "forgotten in the rush to support new writing in the independent states of India and Pakistan after 1947" (Berman, 2018, 15).

T*he author* makes use of detailed descriptions to denounce how Muslim women were secluded within their conservative communities. They were confined within high walls and were scarcely seen in public, as can be read at the very opening of the novel. She described Dilkusha, the place where the story unfolds, as the "imposing" home, a building whose "high blind walls made a stranger take it for an unguarded jail, and literally so it was for its women folk" (Hussain, 2018, 1). Behind these high walls, women were treated like slaves and deprived of their basic rights as human beings.

Purdah and Polygamy could thus be perceived as a revolutionary text against the ill-treatment meted out to women by misusing religion. She obliquely attacked the purdah system and plural marriage, so widely practiced in most Indian Muslim communities, and raised her voice to defend Muslim women, whom she introduced as the main characters in her novel. While male characters dominated male-authored novels, women played significant roles in Hussain's novel, in spite of the fact that these female characters were severely confined by men.

Although Hussain's writing in English has a much smaller readership than the literature written in other Indian languages, it has globally reached a broad Anglophone readership. Writing in English also allowed the writer to reach a wider audience, both in

India and the diaspora. Furthermore, as is affirmed by Muneeza Shamsie in an essay published together with the novel, by choosing English Hussain was looking for a "secular intellectual space" in which she could question the religious traditions without taking the chance of antagonizing Islam and its teachings (as cited in Kirmani, 2018). On the other hand, *Purdah and Polygamy* could also be perceived as a revolution against Muslim fundamentalists, who stood firmly against the idea that Muslim girls could study in English.

As was mentioned before, the topics which Indian female novelists put forth in their fiction fleshed out Indian women's agony, which marked their main difference with their British counterparts. The author's scathing criticism of the unfairness of patriarchy is vividly noticed from the novel's very opening, and keeps on emerging till the very end. Gobinda Prasad Sarma (1990) labels Hussain as a "serious social novelist" (133, 136). Accordingly, *Purdah and Polygamy* should fall into the genre of social realism; it focuses on the real domestic life of Muslim women behind the "high blind walls" of Dilkusha (Hussain, 2018, 1).

Dilkusha belonged to Umar, Kabeer's father, who controlled everyone in his ménage. He was so stringent in following the traditions that the "ancestral property had increased during his regime" (Hussain, 2018, 2). Umar, the dictatorial ruler of Dilkusha, decided to marry off Jamila, his twelve-year old daughter, to a cousin against her and her mother's desire. On his deathbed, he told his wife Zuhra that "it [was] [his] desire to get Jamila married in [his] presence" (Hussain, 2018, 6). Umar kept his wife on a tight leash; during his life Zuhra was kept behind a strict purdah and prohibited from playing any role, particularly in the financial affairs of the family.

Only after her husband's death could Zuhra exert some kind of authority within her family, as her only son, Kabeer, was only sixteen then. For Umar, the emblem of patriarchy, women were "unreasonable creatures" who could not be "trusted in money matters" (Hussain, 2018, 2). He himself bought all that was needed in his house, even his wife's clothes. Zuhra "needed no money because she never went out of the four walls of the house" (Hussain, 2018, 2). Umar frequently said, "no virtuous woman will step out of the house and will see no third person" (Hussain, 2018, 2). Neither did he allow Zuhra to visit

the market, nor take an active part in family gatherings: “arrangements for visiting religious places and picnics were made by the members of the other three families” (Hussain, 2018, 2).

Zuhra herself believed that “a woman going to the pictures can neither be virtuous nor an obedient wife!” (Hussain, 2018, 63). The way Zuhra thought of herself and her status often made Umar tell her that “there is none equal to [her] in virtue, modesty and obedience”, as she never left home. For Umar, the duty of a virtuous wife is to see that “the food is well cooked”, and her ultimate goal in life is to keep “her husband comforted” (Hussain, 2018, 2). According to the rules of traditional Muslim societies, women must be conformist, and act within the outlined scheme drawn by patriarchy. Being a decent woman, Zuhra experienced pride and joy when her husband expressed his satisfaction about the food she herself cooked for him. She replied to his comments, “I did my duty to the crown of my head for whose happiness nothing in this world will be spared” (Hussain, 2018, 2).

Umar was succeeded by his son Kabeer, who assumed the role of the patriarch. Like his father, he believed that women are intellectually and spiritually blind, and that they “always create misery” for themselves (Hussain, 2018, 179). They “never understand the right thing” nor do they “judge correctly”, and this is why they are usually referred to as “naquis ul aql” (mentally weak) (Hussain, 2018, 179). Kabeer also thought that “God has given superiority to man over woman” because he earns money for the family (Hussain, 2018, 179). However, unlike his father, who abstained from marrying more than one wife because he “was very careful with his money” (Hussain, 2018, 2), Kabeer married four wives in an attempt to gratify his physical and social whims.

What a wife is meant to be in a community like that of Dilkusha is never met by any of the four wives Kabeer married. The successful wife in such a household is characterized by her submissiveness to severe supervision, strict enclosure and hard domestic services, in addition to retaining her beauty and delicacy at the same time. Hussain did not attribute any of the required characteristics to any of the four wives. In so doing, she made it clear that the expectations that a woman should be both companionable

and willingly servile, capable housewife and feeble, and energetic and contained creature all at the same time are simply impossible to meet.

When the body of Nazni, Kabeer's high-caste and attractive first wife, was shown to a male doctor and she removed herself from the kitchen, she was considered to have an "unruly" body and thus be an unsuitable wife. As a consequence, Zuhra planned Kabeer's second marriage, and Nazni was cast off as Kabeer's primary wife. Munira, a lower-caste girl, became Kabeer's second wife. Her family conspired with the matchmaker to veil her ugliness from Zuhra, her prospective mother-in-law. Unlike Nazni, who is "small, thin and delicate" (Hussain, 2018, 60), Munira is "dark, with deep-pock marks, and her upper teeth projected prominently" (Hussain, 2018, 70). Since the moment she arrived, Munira was constantly on the move, cleaning, cooking, and serving her husband and her mother-in-law. Her diligence ingratiated her to Zuhra, but not to Kabeer. As Zuhra once told her, "You have neither beauty nor wealth. […] Your only weapons are your strength and spirit" (Hussain, 2018, 73).

Although Zuhra rejoiced in having Munira as her daughter-in-law, as she obeyed her "meekly" and worked "vigorously" for all, Kabeer regarded her looks, her skin colour and energy as animalistic and unbefitting to him. When Munira once tried her best to seduce Kabeer by carefully hiding her protruding teeth when she smiled, Kabeer disdained her and described her as "the negress", adding that an "ape" would look better (Hussain, 2018, 100, 101). Despite her lack of beauty, which renders her unfit, it is obvious that Munira befits the servile role of the obedient wife much better than her rival Nazni. She is able to cope with the rigors of doing the household chores, becoming a mother, and caring for her husband and other members of the family even in the last days of her pregnancy.

Unsatisfied with Nazni and Munira, Kabeer decided to marry one more wife to make up for the unsuitability of the previous ones. According to his close friend Mustafa, "this time [Kabeer] will have a wife to [his] entire satisfaction" (Hussain, 2018, 128). However, his perfect third wife, Maghbool, turned out to be a non-conformist woman, and this in spite of all the admirable characteristics that she had. She preferred death to being the wife of a polygamous man, but had neither option nor ability to disobey her father's

will. Maghbool asked her father, who had agreed to marry her off to Kabeer, how she could get on with such a man if “there is no love” (Hussain, 2018, 188). She predicted that in such a relationship “disagreement and misunderstanding creep in and life becomes unbearable” (Hussain, 2018, 188). Maghbool goes on to argue that, to live with such a man, “even the sincerest service will deem as disservice to him”, that her marriage has “destroyed the lives of three helpless creatures”, the curse of her rivals “will always haunt [her] happiness”, and their jealousy “will make [her] daily life a misery” (Hussain, 2018, 188).

However, such thoughts never come into men’s minds because they do not care about what women may think or experience in a polygamous household. Kabeer’s discontent with his three wives led him to marry the fourth, which is the maximum number of wives that a Muslim man is allowed to marry on certain conditions, as is stated in the Qur’an. However, he did not find what he yearned for in any of the four wives he married. Nazni, his first wife, is pretty but frail. Munira, the second, is very energetic but homely. Maghbool, the third, is attractive and cultivated but nonconformist. As for Noorjahan, his fourth wife, she is beautiful and young but inept. Hence, none of the four wives was good enough to meet his insatiable needs. As is stated by Nazni’s father, who tries to justify to his own son the second marriage of his son-in-law, “the first marriage is the only one worthy of its name. Subsequent marriages are nominal and are caused by necessity”. Yet, there was no real need for Kadeer’s successive marriages. Nazni’s father concludes that “men of complex nature are not satisfied with fair dealings either at home or in society” (Hussain, 2018, 113).

Women must tolerate whatever a man does, no matter whether his deeds are fair or unfair towards them. They must avoid God’s wrath, which is seen as the immediate consequence of a man’s dissatisfaction as promulgated in traditional Hindu and Muslim societies. Though Nazni, Kabeer’s high class wife, was furious at the third marriage of her husband, she realized that she had to “yield and adjust herself to the circumstances” (Hussain, 2018, 180). She was convinced by Kabeer’s words when he said that “God has given superiority to man over woman”, and that a woman must show her wonderful love for her husband by tolerating “hundreds of rivals” (Hussain, 2018, 179). The way Nazni

views herself and her situation brings to light the allegedly Qur'anic reasons often given by patriarchy to unfairly oppress women. She assumes that she must accept the fact that "the woman who makes her husband sorry goes to the Seventh Hell where the fire burns eternally. She is burnt alive and is recreated and burnt again" (Hussain, 2018, 91).

Another significant issue in Hussain's novel is the negative way in which the epitomes of patriarchy, namely, Umar, his son Kabeer and his grandson Akram are described. Umar, who is named after the second Muslim caliph, is portrayed as an oppressive man. He deprives his wife and all other female members in his household of their most basic rights as preached by Islam. As to Kabeer, his son, he is introduced as a man whose social and sexual desires increase with each new marriage. As a consequence, when Kabeer dies, he leaves all his wives in the lurch. "He wantonly created a heavy responsibility before he fulfilled his duty to those innocent and helpless creatures" (Hussain, 2018, 302). Near the end of the novel, the reader is introduced to Akram, Kabeer's son from his first wife. Akram is portrayed as a modern young man who "eats, drinks and lives in an Englishwoman's house". He has all the intention to "change his religion and wear English suits" as he "does not like [his] society" (Hussain, 2018, 283). Yet, as a clear sign that the circulation of patriarchy continues, Akram soon steps into Kabeer's shoes regarding the gratification of his physical desires. In her endeavors to undermine paternalism, Iqbalunnisa Hussain introduces Umar as an ailing ruler who dies at the very beginning of the story to be succeeded by his immature son, Kabeer. She brings her novel to an end with the death of Kabeer and the rise to power of his son Akram, who is rather more distanced from traditions and religious bigotry.

This successions of ever worse male characters incites readers to interpret it as the author's intent to do away with patriarchal respectability. Every now and then Hussain ironically refers to the privileges bestowed upon men and once and again reinforced by the distorted interpretation of the Qur'an and Islamic teachings. A good example of her biting sarcasm can be seen in the opening of chapter fifteen.

> Submission, subjection or servitude as it is variously called has its own significance as far as the feminine world is concerned and is very effective in making man

> favourably minded towards a woman. It creates pity for her and quenches the fire of his passion. It is applauded by members of both sexes. The greater her submissiveness and her ignorance the greater is the self-importance felt by him. An unfortunate woman devoid of this unique quality is only tolerated if not scorned. (Hussain, 2018, 198)

Hussain's novel therefore depicts the reality in the polygamous traditional Muslim community in India by focusing on a microcosm, the zenana, where a Muslim woman experiences both seclusion and the humiliation of becoming a co-wife. *Purdah and Polygamy* basically highlights two of the touchiest issues in her conventional society, i.e. purdah and polygamy, which prevent Muslim women from achieving freedom and happiness. As was stated before, the novel was written in the 1940s, a period in which patriarchal and traditional restrictions were at their highest and Muslim women hardly tried to fight against them. Hence, this novel clearly points to the socio-feminist consciousness of its writer, her philosophy, attitude and conception of life.

2.2.2. The Plight of Muslim Widows

As was explained before, Islam, in its essence, granted women a position equal to that of men in their societies. Nonetheless, the status of Muslim women deteriorated when patriarchy began interpreting Qur'anic texts in such a way that men were allowed to totally dominate them. Simultaneously, traditions played an effective role in subjugating women, particularly widows. In a traditional Indian society, both Muslim and Hindu women were segregated. They had to observe purdah and live in the zenana (Shamsie, 2015, 2). Thus, traditions rather than religion were and are still ruling Indian society. Moreover, many practices were brought from non-Muslim societies and subsequently imposed on Muslim women. Such practices include child marriage and sati, which come originally from Hinduism or other non-Muslim religions.

Sati, or suttee, was a Hindu custom, no longer legal, whereby a woman should be burnt alive in the same fire in which her dead husband's body was cremated. Although Sati was not practiced with Muslim widows in the same way it was practiced with Hindu ones, (the deceased husband is not cremated in Islam), Muslim widows were nonetheless bound to tolerate too many grievances after the death of their husbands. As a social reformer,

Hussain was among the first who fought for women's education and the community acceptance of widows and divorcees, and this clearly shows in *Purdah and Polygamy.*

The author notably shed light on helpless widows and divorcees, their lack of social recognition, and how they were regarded as inauspicious. Upon her husband's death, Zuhra was humiliated by her in-laws and strangers alike. Following the tradition, she had to tolerate all kinds of humiliation. As was believed, a widow was the cause of her husband's death. When Zuhra mourned her deceased husband screaming "I shall kill myself and be buried with him", her sister-in-law indignantly answered her: "Don't pretend by saying that you want to kill yourself. You killed him all right" (Hussain, 2018, 10). Then, Umar's sister asked for a stone and broke "the bangles from both the hands of the weeping Zuhra" and "pulled and threw the *Latcha* (black beads), the token of marriage, near the corpse" (Hussain, 2018, 11). To make matters even worse, Zuhra was also dispossessed of all her jewels.

As a widow, Zuhra was clothed in white dress and "her coloured dress was taken and thrown near the dead body", which suggests that everything in a widow's life must be colourless. She was not even allowed to "touch the corpse for fear of polluting it" (Hussain, 2018, 11). As can be read in the novel, "they brought the reluctant creature [Zuhra] away by force and laid her on her bed" (Hussain, 2018, 11). In addition to the degradation that her sister-in-law made her feel, strange women who attended the funeral inflicted different kinds of humiliation on her as well. As one of these women who come to offer her condolences for the death of Umar says: "what is the life of a woman after her husband? A woman lives for him and him alone. His death should mean the death of all her desires, comfort and happiness. Even the dogs are shown better consideration" (Hussain, 2018, 14). It is thus made clear that women can be rather more cruel than men themselves.

Like Hindu widows, who had to "lead a dreary life of enforced celibacy, and society did not show much sympathy to them" (Altekar, 1956, 163), the Muslim ones were not allowed to attend any joyous events, not even the marriages of their own children. As another mourner says: a "widow has to be conscious of her sin in causing the death of her

husband in thought, word and deed. She should avoid being present at happy events and not try to make others miserable" (Hussain, 2018, 14).

Yet another portrait of the plight of widows is given when Kabeer's third wife, Maghbool, was taken to the tailor to have her measurements taken. Maghbool insisted that her widowed aunt should accompany her to the tailor. She "cried to her heart's content on her breast" (Hussain, 2018, 144). She did it because she believed that being accompanied by a widow would bring bad omen, and would thus spoil her polygamous marriage. "Custom says that one must not embrace a widow" (Hussain, 2018, 145). Maghbool preferred having her shroud made to wearing her wedding dress in a polygamous marriage, but her widow aunt "went mechanically to the tailor and after the measurements had been taken secluded herself in her den" in order not to ruin the joyous event, i.e. her niece's marriage (Hussain, 2018, 145).

Despite the fact that women are the bearers of the family's honour and pride, not only men but children, servants and even dogs are accorded more freedom, respect and compassion than them. In addition to the comments that the narrator occasionally makes, multiple testimonies and negative attitudes towards women and their position in an Indian Muslim community fill up the pages of the novel. According to Hubel (2015), Hussain apparently endeavours to raise public awareness about the conventional platitudes which prevail in Indian society and literature. Such a cliched representation asserts female acquiescence to pain, and praises women for being the carriers of both their families and the Muslim nation's sufferings. However, beside such common platitudes there is an incongruent stance which manifests the outrage and despair of these women.

Incongruity can also be seen in the behavior of female characters. Some of them, like Munira, try to restate the diktats of Muslim patriarchy. On the contrary, others, like Maghbool, bravely protest against them. Finally some others, like Nazni, try to play both cards when they have the chance. This discrepancy, in turn, renders the novel even more complex, as very often readers become uncertain as to what to think. As a matter of fact, it is this complexity that turns this novel into a "resonant text" (Hubel, 2015, 3). Although

Hussain is at times candid and quite straightforward in her style, her fiction is crammed with paradoxes which increase its level of complexity.

Hussain adroitly employs irony and, at times, a particular sense of humor to valiantly depict the unjust treatment Muslim widows receive within their societies. When reading the aforementioned excerpts from the novel, which put women in a position lower than that of a dog, or associate them with the devil, readers can feel some kind of ambivalence, quite characteristic of Hussain's style, which inevitably brings to the fore the hypocrisy that rules this kind of communities.

The way Muslim patriarchy views its women, namely, as the ultimate embodiment of tradition and religious values, compels them to strictly conform to the traditions associated with the teachings of Islam in conservative Muslim societies. According to Mujeeb (1967), conformity is the "maintenance of uniformity in belief and practice" (56). Yet, the concept of conformity in itself is perplexing, especially when considered in a traditional conservative society like that of India. The uncertainty, or confusion, of the term conformity arises from the overpowering influence of traditions, especially when these traditions are associated with Islamic teachings. As was explained before, Islam has been 'decontextualized' and then 'recontextualized'. Besides, many customs from non-Muslim societies, such as the Hindu one, infiltrated into Islam and were enforced, particularly on Muslim women, to make their conditions even worse. In this way, Umar's widow, Zuhra, had to tolerate indignity and humiliation when she had done no wrong, nor did she protest against what was unjustly imposed on her. She rather accepted it as if it were her inevitable fate. It is such submissiveness that has allowed traditions to become sacred and inviolable rules.

Over the years, there have always been efforts by Indian Muslim women in general, and female feminist writers in particular, to transform traditional patriarchal social structures and make changes in Muslim women's conditions within their traditional and conservative communities. Although they succeeded in introducing some minor changes, many conventional stereotypes that hinder any possible progression in Muslim women's status have prevailed over them. In addition, any endeavours intended to rectify what is

wrongly perceived were considered to be attempts to pervert the Muslim community, something no one dares to do. Thus, although Hussein's approach is at times pretty circuitous, her views and ideologies, which aimed at changing Islamic society for the better, were regarded as utterly revolutionary and dangerous at the time.

Hussein did not revolt against Islam and its teachings, as some might think. She rather stood against the outmoded beliefs which were falsely attributed to Islam and distorted it at the same time. The big challenge is that these norms and traditions could not, and cannot be, openly approached or criticized because they have gradually turned into sacred beliefs by being linked to religion. Thus, when *Purdah and Polygamy* was first published in 1944, the Indian Muslim community reacted aggressively, because such a conservative community was not prepared to tolerate such ideas. Furthermore, the publication of her novel incited many to demand Iqbalunnisa Hussain's excommunication (Rathod, 2005, 210). In short, the social ideals suggested in *Purdah and Polygamy* were utterly rejected by the majority of Muslim Indians.

Although *Purdah and Polygamy* is Hussain's only novel and was derisively received, it has nonetheless enjoyed some recognition in the history of 1940s Indo-Anglian literature. In this novel, Hussain wanted to ask this question: "how long should Muslim women wait to obtain their liberty?" She also made it clear that Muslim women should not wait for a miracle or savior to change their reality. They have to rebel themselves in order to gain their liberty. As is stated by Shubhraji Namahom, "one should lift oneself up by one's own efforts" (2011, par. 3). Muslim women should thus venture revolting against evil practices, which they have tolerated for so long. She has also suggested that women should unify their efforts to face up to patriarchy, as this is, according to her, a "disease that could not be cured so it had to be endured" (Hussain, 2018, 280). This shows in the novel in the fact that, in the end, Kabeer's four wives "were not jealous of each other" because the "common ailment had made them friends against the formidable enemy" (Hussain, 2018, 280).

Hussein did her best to raise awareness among women, especially with regard to the importance of solidarity to confront the oppressive patriarchal authority, which imposes

on them practices that have nothing to do with religion. In other words, women should be aware of patriarchal manipulation and policies, which aim at employing some of them as vehicles whereby other powerless women, widows in particular, are oppressed. Like El Saadawi, Hussain believed that, for women's struggle to be effective, women should get together to effectually demand their rights, regardless of their religion, race or social status.

2.2.3. The Purdah System and Women's Seclusion

Muslim women, Hyderabad, India (Cooper, 2018, 170)

Due to the importance of the veil/purdah and the heated arguments it has provoked within divergent Muslim societies and outside them, I will touch here on some historical and religious details which stand behind the debates about the imposition of the veil and its forms, purdah in particular, on Muslim women. Although purdah is a more inclusive term, and it encompasses more segregating practices than the veil, these two terms are sometimes going to be interchangeably used to indicate the same practice. In her book *Islam and Human Rights: Tradition and Politics*, Ann Elizabeth Mayer defines purdah as "a system of keeping women in seclusion and segregated from men to whom they are not related and ensuring that, if they leave their homes, they are veiled and escorted by male family members" (Mayer, 2018, 237). According to Abass Maki (1974), a woman's body was, and is still, an abundant source for legislation. Issues such as delimiting what is

permitted and prohibited are examined in accordance with a set of socially accepted patterns which include body movements, expressions, and requirements.

However, these patterns were set in a way that serves the interest of the dominant ideology, i.e. patriarchy. The legitimate authority that man has on a woman's body in Muslim societies restrains the body because it is considered to encapsulate the honour and chastity of the Muslim woman. Maki (1974) also states that, since the free movement of a woman's body is considered sexual, keeping its movement under control is deemed vital to maintain honour and virtue. Muslim conservatives like Maududi (2011) argue that in societies where purdah is not observed, as in the West, degeneracy is seen everywhere.

They severely criticize the western principles of equality between the sexes, women's economic independence and, above all, the "free intermingling of the sexes" (Maududi, 2011, 26). Showing their abhorrence of western principles, Muslim conservatives attempt to prove that the veil and seclusion of women are of great importance to maintain public morality in their communities. They constantly debate that the way women are treated and the freedom they enjoy in the West lead to the "undermining of the family, lower birthrates, immorality, promiscuity, perversion, and social decay" (Maududi, 2011, 12, 15, 26, 71). They also believe that the Muslims who advocate the rights enjoyed by western women have abandoned the "sense of honor, chastity, moral purity, matrimonial loyalty, undefiled lineage, and the like virtues" (Maududi, 2011, 73).

Maududi also states that women's chastity can only be preserved through imposing purdah on them. He explains that purdah is one of the basic principles of human rights in the Islamic world (as cited in Mayer, 2018, 99-100). Similarly, Aftab Hussain Saikia, an Indian Judge and former Chief Justice of Indian High Courts, claims that "purdah keeps both sexes chaste and guards them against gazing at one another" (Chaudhry, 1997, 8).

To avoid looking at each other lustfully is an Islamic overemphasized principle, and is based on Qur'anic texts: "Say to the believing men that they restrain their eyes and guard their private parts. That is purer for them. Surely, Allah is well aware of what they do" (Qur'an 24:30); and "Say to the believing women that they restrain their eyes and guard their private parts" (Qur'an 24:31). Nonetheless, in practice, only women are condemned

for violating such Islamic teachings. In fact, observing strict purdah is the recurrent argument of Muslim conservatives, who stand firmly against women's freedom, claimed by the West as natural and a fundamental human right.

For Muslims, there are two main Qur'anic *Ayat* (texts) that are considered to be the basis on which Muslim conservatives legitimize a generalized model of veiling for all Muslim women. The first Qur'anic *Aya* is:

> O Prophet! Tell thy wives and thy daughters and the women of the believers that they should draw close to them portions of their [jilbāb] *loose* outer coverings. That is nearer that they may *thus* be distinguished and not molested. (Qur'an 33:59)

And the second is:

> And say to the believing women […] that they disclose not their *natural and artificial* beauty except that which is apparent thereof, and that they draw their head-coverings over their bosoms, and that they disclose not their beauty save to their husbands, or to their fathers, or the fathers of their husbands or their sons or the sons of their husbands or their brothers, or the sons of their brothers, or the sons of their sisters, or their women, or what their right hands possess, or such of male attendants as have no sexual appetite, or young children who have no knowledge of the hidden parts of women. (Qur'an 24:31)

As these Qur'anic *Ayat* are God's direct order to the prophet and Muslim believers, they are interpreted by conservatives in such a way that grants men absolute authority to force women, not only to cover their heads, faces, hands, and feet, but also to observe "domestic segregation" (Barlas, 2019, 46). According to Asma Barlas (2019), those conservatives justify enforcing such severe form of veiling on the grounds that "women's bodies are pudendal, hence sexually corrupting to those who see them; it is thus necessary to shield Muslim men from viewing women's bodies by concealing them" (54). Barlas also criticizes those who regard veil or purdah as the "means to guard women's sexual chastity" or to keep men at bay in a Muslim community. She also attacks those who believe that veil

is a proof that "there is only slavery" for women and that women cannot be liberated from this bondage (21).

She goes on to argue that those who consider the veil as the hallmark of Muslim communities ignore the historical fact that the veil was brought on by *Jāhilī* (the pre-Islamic era) male promiscuity. In an interview, Nawal El Saadawi severely censured those who interpret the Qur'anic text in a biased way. She remarked that many religious men who have studied the Qur'an constantly assert that women should be veiled because men have sexual desires and look to women lustfully. Then she stated that, if this is so, it is men who should be either veiled or have their eyes pulled out of their sockets. If a man has sexual desires and a woman has sexual desires as well, why does not a man cover his body if the woman desires it? Is woman stronger than man (Yaqin, 2015)?

In a similar vein, Huda Shaqrani (2017) comments on the correlation of the veil or purdah with viewing the female's body as a sexual commodity. She thinks that sexual instinct, by its nature, is aroused not only by what one sees with one's eyes, but it may also be aroused by the voice as well as by the mere imagination. Hence, the veil is not always sufficient to avoid arousing man's sexual drive. Shaqrani asks, what is the solution? Should a woman's voice be suppressed? This actually explains why most of the veiled women remain silent in the street. Nonetheless, the essential question one may ask is how to avoid the sexual temptation that may result from the mere imagination, especially when we give free rein to it whereas the rest of our senses are blocked by the purdah.

Furthermore, El Saadawi (1980) states that the word 'women' constantly evokes the concept *fitna*[1] (seductiveness) for Muslims. She explains that Muslim society invariably accuses its women of following the footsteps of their ancestral mother, Eve, who competently "enticed Adam to comply with her wishes and fall victim to *fitna*". El Saadawi adds that Muslim women combine both "being positive towards sex", which is considered to be "one of the attractions of life" by Islam, and *fitna* (seductiveness), i.e. they express their desire for men exercising their charms (1980, 136).

[1]*fitna* means woman's overpowering seductiveness. It combines the qualities of attraction and mischievousness.

According to most Islamic feminists, purdah is not a divine precept, as is often suggested. They argue that all the Qur'anic interpretations that claim the necessity of purdah observation are merely biased interpretations, which patriarchy has implanted into people's minds in order to control and limit women's social roles. In fact, purdah is one of the social customs that have been imposed, not only on Muslim women, but also on those practising other religions, such as Hinduism, Judaism and Christianity. In his foreword to Hussain's *Purdah and Polygamy*, Sir Ramalinga Reddy remarks, "as I read of the joys and sorrows of the [Muslim] women portrayed in this novel, it was borne in upon me that not merely in their lives but in many of their customs, manners and superstitions, they were own sisters to Hindus" (Reddy, 2018, ii).

Although Islam and Hinduism are widely different, women of both religions share many precepts in relation to social customs and traditions. Trials, tribulations, fears and social inhibitions that subjugate wives, widows and daughters of both religions are also hardly differentiated. However, their divergent religions do not seem to have resulted in diversity when it comes to female submissiveness, passivity and self-abnegation. Such presentation by Hussain indicates that purdah and other forms of oppression practiced on women are simply social norms and traditions that have been maintained and reinforced by religion to keep women dominated, regardless of their religious beliefs (Reddy, 2018, ii).

In India in particular, purdah was one of the major issues addressed by the pre-independence Indian women's movement, which began promoting social reforms at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Purdah was frequently censured as being an "infliction on the natural dignity of womanhood" and a "deplorable custom […] which degrades India in the eyes of the world" (Rukhmabai, 1929, 145, 148).

For Hindu reformist women, the job of quitting the purdah system was easier, because they claimed that the practice of purdah is an Islamic custom which had been imported with the Islamic invasion of India. They argued that purdah is a culturally corrupted custom that has no roots in Hinduism. According to Maitrayee Chaudhuri (1993), "Hindu women found it easier to break purdah, especially once it was labelled a

Muslim custom, without roots in one's culture" (160). Obviously, viewing purdah in such a way makes Muslim women's effort to abolish purdah quite complicated, as Muslim women were "forced to defend it as distinctive of their cultural identity" (Chaudhuri, 1993, 160). Apart from that, it seems that a woman's strict observation of purdah can also be considered to be an insult to man because a woman, behind her purdah, treats man as a sexual animal she must prevent from pouncing on her.

Leila Ahmed (1992) writes on the origin of veiling, and on which women were required to observe the veil and which were not. She states that, in the Middle East in particular, the rules on veiling are very similar, or rather based on, the ancient Babylonian and Assyrian laws. These laws obliged "wives and daughters of seigniors, concubines accompanying their mistress" and former "sacred prostitutes now married" to wear veil in public, whereas harlots and slaves were forbidden to veil (Ahmed, 1992, 15). There were also severe penalties for those who were caught illegally veiling.

Furthermore, Gerda Lerner (1986, 139) explains that the fundamental purpose of the veil was not so much to differentiate the upper classes from the rest, but rather to distinguish respectable women from those who were publicly available. According to this critic, dividing women into respectable and disreputable was fundamental to patriarchy. The position that women occupied in society depended essentially on the existence or absence of their relationship to men who could offer them protection. Thus, the veil was used to classify women according to their "sexual activity", and to signal to men which women were "under male protection" and which were "fair game" (Ahmed, 1992, 15).

From this perspective, the above Qur'anic texts explicitly point to the pre-Islamic and slave-owning communities, in which sexual abuse conducted by non-Muslim men was normative. The emphasis on wearing the jilbāb was, then, to distinguish free Muslim women from slaves who had been allegedly regarded as non-believers, and thus fair game by Jāhilī men. Taking all of this into account, it can be concluded that the main purpose of putting on the jilbāb (loose outer coverings) in such a way, as described in the Qur'anic *Aya*, is not to hide free Muslim women from men's eyes, as the conservatives proclaim, but rather to render them visible and recognizable by Jāhilī men as a means to protect them.

According to Ahmed (1992), only in a slave-owning society did the jilbāb signify sexual non-availability. Since men associated the jilbāb with such a meaning in the pre-Islamic period, and the jilbāb was worn by Muslim free women, it served as "a marker of Jāhilī male sexual promiscuity and abuse at a time when women had no legal recourse against such abuse and had to rely on themselves for their own protection" (Barlas, 2019, 56).

Barlas goes on to explain that such a form of recognition, or rather protection, had taken its meaning from the "social structure of a slave-owning society in which sexual abuse, especially of slaves, was rampant" (2019, 55). As a consequence, the Qur'an, in all its *Ayat*, does not mandate the generalized form of veil we have today. Practicing purdah, which is a custom rather than a religious rule, is intended to meet certain ends that were nothing but the outcome of the demands arising from the conditions prevailing at the time.

For many Muslim feminists, purdah is principally used to restrict women's social performance and serves as a tool of subjugation, which prevents women from discovering and/or being their true selves. Despite the allegations that purdah is necessary to ensure the protection of men from the *fitna* of women, so that they can focus on God's worshiping, it appears that purdah serves to widen the gap between males and females. Muslim women are not seen in mosques because they are not allowed to appear in a public place where they may come in contact with the other sex. A telling example from Hussain's *Purdah and Polygamy* is the way in which Umar segregated his wife Zuhar, who never left her husband's house since she entered it. She neither "participated nor was she allowed" to take part in any religious practice outside her home (Hussain, 2018, 2).

Men often claim that Prophet Mohammed discouraged the worship of women in public by saying: "the presence of women in the mosques inspires men with feelings other than those purely devotional" (as cited in Cooper, 2018, 170). Nonetheless, as was explained in chapter one and is in turn claimed by Muslim feminists, *hadith* (the oral report from the Prophet Mohammed) is a false testimony, as Prophet Mohammed never said or did anything of the kind. Thus, what is attributed to the prophet regarding women's

presence in mosques is either inserted on purpose or decontextualized in order to serve patriarchal policies.

Iqbalunnisa Hussain argued that the prevailing conventions in Indian Muslim communities at the time were “inaugurated to provide the wants of the people” (Hussain, 2015, 44). They were considered to be the “outcome of the demand” arising from people’s conditions (Hussain, 2015, 44). Imposing strict purdah on Muslim women had its advantages, as it rendered them “obedient and loyal wives, devoted mothers, and helpful and considerate sisters” (Hussain, 2015, 44). Moreover, it kept Muslim Indian girls “free from the evils of western civilization and the disagreeable results of free mixing with members of the other sex” (44). The aforementioned advantages of purdah could be partly understandable and/or applicable in the first half of the nineteenth century; however, they should be seen as a clear disadvantage in the latter half of the century, when people’s lives began to change.

In order to gain the upper hand, patriarchy has imposed a strict purdah system under the pretext that purdah is essential for any female Muslim. However, its main intention was no other than to implant in women’s minds the belief that females’ only aim in life is to serve family members and disregard any other temptations that may distract them from devoting themselves wholeheartedly to their domestic chores. Hussain expressively rejected the way in which purdah and other oppressive practices are lodged in women’s minds. When instructing his daughter, Maghbool’s father, to give but one example, goes as far as to assert: “a woman is lifeless, feelingless and respectless. She is respected by revering her husband. She becomes lively by making him happy. She feels as he does. When he is sorry she is sad. When he is happy she is cheerful” (Hussain, 2018, 189).

Hussain herself suffered strict purdah as a Muslim young girl; yet, with the help of her liberal husband, she eventually took it off and pursued her higher education. Her personal experience of purdah is obviously reflected in her fictional and nonfictional works, particularly in *Purdah and Polygamy*, as the very title of the novel suggests. Hussain strove to bring to light the disadvantages of purdah and its substantial negative impact on Muslim women’s lives: imposing strict purdah system in the second half of the

nineteenth century affected Muslim women's lives educationally, socially, economically, and physically.

Purdah made the education of Muslim girls rather difficult. Consequently, the percentage of educated Muslim women, in comparison to those of other communities, was very low. As can be read in the novel, "the number of graduates in the community can be counted on one's fingers" (Hussain, 2015, 44). Purdah-attired women were regarded as uncivilized, as they were deprived, among other things, of the chance to mix up with women from other more educated communities. Purdah, thus, did not only confine a woman's body, but it also restricted her mind. There is no doubt that strict purdah detaches women from their surroundings, objectifies them, and nourishes their psychological alienation and loneliness. A woman who observes purdah loses her identity; she is looked at as the other, as an entity who totally depends on the man who owns her.

Hussain also makes it clear that the social condition of the Muslim women who were neither educated nor married to the elite was deplorable. Although the Qur'an by no means enforces social and gender disparities, the imposed purdah system rendered Muslim women inferior and uncivilized, imprisoned between the four walls of their abodes. They had no contact with the external world. As a result, their "information and knowledge of world affairs are next to nothing" (Hussain, 2015, 19-20). This, in turn, turned them into "strict followers of old customs and traditions", that is, the ideas that patriarchy wanted to print in their minds (Hussain, 2015, 19-20). "Our girls never step out of the house. There are some who have lived and died in one house all their lives", Akram, Kabeer's son, tells Mary, the English woman who criticizes the way in which Muslim families curtail their children's freedom (Hussain, 2018, 272).

Poverty in Indian Muslim communities was proverbial; only men were expected to be the family's breadwinners. Accordingly, Muslim women were "parasites in rich families and an economic burden in poor ones" (Hussain, 2015, 45). Due to the social restrictions which resulted from observing strict purdah, women were not given the chance to take any part in earning their families' living. In contrast, women in non-Muslim communities often worked and helped to support their families. This explains why the financial situation of

conservative Muslim families was usually worse than that of non-Muslims. To make matters worse, purdah also undermined Muslim women's health, as the great majority of secluded girls suffered from some kind of disease that could "easily be cured by sunlight, fresh air, and exercise" (Hussain, 2015, 45). Strict purdah in turn rendered Muslim women physically unfit to do any strenuous work. Nazni, Kabeer's first wife, belonged to a high-class liberal family which was less strict in observing purdah. When she moved to live in Dilkusha, where the strictest form of purdah was imposed on women, she found herself imprisoned, and it was this confinement that brought about her ailment: "She felt better in her mother's house. As soon as she returned home her illness reappeared" (Hussain, 2018, 64).

Illiteracy and ignorance cramped Muslim women's lives. Furthermore, the health and mental problems caused by the negative impact of purdah did not only affect the Muslim family or a small Muslim community, but they also damaged the Muslim nation at large. In tune with Nawal El Saadawi, Hussain took it that the degeneration of any given nation is a consequence of ignoring its women, because women are the "educators and instructors of humanity", since the "foundations of education, and that of character and its development, are laid by them" (Hussain, 2015, 46). If the success of any nation or its fall is in the hands of its women, this explains why Muslim Indian women's illiteracy, ignorance and superstition have produced a "degenerate nation which is struggling hard to make both ends meet" (Hussain, 2015, 46).

In *Purdah and Polygamy* Hussain unequivocally attacked these restrictive practices, which drastically inhibited Muslim women's progress, deprived them of their essential rights and ruined their happiness. In the course of the novel, she recurrently makes use of irony to disparage such degrading practices against women. To give but one example, when the dead body of Umar, the ultimate representative of patriarchy, was washed, shrouded and kept in the common courtyard to be last seen by the family members and relatives, women were lastly allowed to see the deceased, providing that they observed purdah. Then the narrator ironically comments, "[a]fter all a man is a man even dead, and purdah before him is essential" (Hussain, 2018, 68).

It should also be noted that, despite the fact that the purdah system is one and apparently has the same function in all the Muslim communities that impose it on their women, there is some disparity as regards the strictness with which it is applied in terms of women's status, age, the place in which they live, and whether they are married or unmarried. Such disparity clearly indicates that these restrictions are imposed and interpreted in accordance with patriarchal interests and traditions rather than true religious obligations. Observing strict purdah was considered by clerics and traditionalists to be crucial to maintain both men and women's religious purity, to make them act with proper decorum. However, as Hussain's story develops, it is clear that the practice of purdah is conducted with varying degrees of conviction in the different Muslim communities.

No matter whether it is enforced in the name of purity or tradition, purdah always has negative consequences, as Maghbool, polygamist Kabeer's third wife, vividly claims: "the life of a child and that of a wife are not at all alike. A woman being transferred from a semi-prison to a real one has no aim in life" (Hussain, 2018, 191). The real prison is nothing but Dilkusha, where women were closely watched and strictly confined. Women's seclusion in separate quarters is yet another purdah imposition. In traditional Muslim societies, houses were divided into *zenana* (women's quarters) and *mardana* (men's quarters). In the *zenana*, all the family female members and children were confined in a small area, without fresh air, sunlight and ventilation. Unlike men, women were not allowed to leave their dark realm so as not to be seen by any men who were not within the immediate kin unit of their fathers, brothers, sons and husbands. Such environment, according to Hussain, has been the main cause of "high death rates among women due to tuberculosis, which is called a bedroom disease", because it "runs not in the bones but in the blankets. It spreads in, and by dark, dirty housing conditions" (Hussain, 2015, 98).

Most women's quarters were built to guarantee women's absolute privacy and detachment from men. Elizabeth Cooper (2018), for example, described them as a "courtyard, with rooms opening upon it from the four sides. These rooms were more like large alcoves, being separated from the court only by arches" (172). Cooper then describes her experience when she accompanied Muslim women in Hyderabad, a great Muslim state in India, to attend a religious ceremony offered by women of one of the best known old

Muslim families. She describes their arrival at the house as follows: the "guard immediately turned his back when he saw that the carriage contained ladies, and our servant went ahead to see that all menservants were out of sight before my Mohammedan friends [Muslim women] would enter the courtyard (Cooper, 2018, 172).

In keeping with this, Hussain opened her novel with a vivid description of the place where four wives who shared the same husband in a polygamous marriage lived. Dilkusha was an imposing building in the heart of the city. It "commanded respect and awe, if premises have any such effect, among the neighbouring shops, restaurants, cafes and hotels". However, its high walls made it look like a fortified prison in which women were sentenced for life. All the rooms in Kabeer's house "received light through a ventilator or a glass-tile in their ceiling" (Hussain, 2018, 1). Hussain includes more details in her description of the zenana. Men's entrance into it made women scurry into their rooms far from the yard, which was "their only source of light and fresh air" (Hussain, 2018, 1). In addition, women there are kept under severe surveillance, even within their own rooms. Zuhra, Kabeer's mother, embodied the patriarchal eye which violated the privacy of all the females who inhabited the zenana. This is why she so carefully chose the position of her room in the women's quarters. From there, she could view each and every movement of the rest of women. She could command everyone who entered or left the place. Zuhra "had arranged her bed in such a way that she could see the visitors clearly through the curtained window without being noticed by them" (Hussain, 2018, 199). She is the "queen of the house and rules over all her *subjects* with an iron hand" (Hussain, 2018, 50, emphasis added).

2.2.4. Marriage and Muslim Women's Rights

Unlike El Saadawi's pessimistic outlook on marriage and its contract, which she likened to a possession contract, Hussain took it that marriage contract, if it is done in accordance with the true teachings of Islam, is an important legitimate and legal document that safeguards and preserves women's rights. As emphasized by Prophet Muhammad, "marriage is not a sale but a contract between two equally sensible persons" (Hussain, 2015, 28). Ambar Ahmad (2015) also demonstrated that marriage, in Islam, is a contract drawn up between a male and a female, who have the right to lay down certain conditions

to be agreed on by both sides. Thus, women have the right to set conditions respecting polygamy and custody of children in case of divorce along with other important matters, which grant women a degree of control over their lives.

Based on Islamic rules and principles, no early marriage is allowed. A Muslim woman's parents or guardians are not allowed to decide on behalf of their daughter if she is pubescent. Additionally, a Muslim woman should have complete freedom to choose her husband, and her consent is essential in all cases. Hussain elaborately wrote on marriage and its consequences, particularly in the novel under discussion. To raise awareness and draw attention to such issues, she focused on the paradoxes which contradicted Islam and its principles in relation to Muslim girls and their marriage. Jamila, Umar's twelve-year daughter, was married off by her father against her desire. Maghbool, Kabeer's third wife, was also forced to marry a polygamous man whom she despised too much. And Kabeer's fourth wife, Noorjahan, was exchanged for the exemption of the accumulated rent of the house in which she lived with her grandmother.

Furthermore, Islam has given women all the rights to repudiate the marriage contract on attaining the age of majority. On the other hand, a Muslim man is bound to "settle a recognized dowry before he enters into a marriage contract". Claiming the dowry by his wife is one of the priorities in Islam as far as Muslim women's welfare is concerned (Hussain, 2015, 36). However, with the selectivity and biased interpretation of the Qur'anic texts and other religious sources, along with the inherited traditions and conventions, Muslim women lost all such rights.

Hussain began her novel with describing the traditional way in which a wife is chosen. Then she moved to illustrate the way this wife is treated in her in-laws's household. She also elaborated on the sufferings of women in polygamous marriages as well as widows. She explained how the criteria, according to which Muslim women were chosen as prospective wives, were far removed from the teachings of Islam and its principles. In fact, the way a Muslim wife was chosen in Muslim Indian communities, as introduced in Hussain's novel, contradicted the Islamic guidelines and the high status granted to women by Islam. Reading pages 25, 26 and 27 of the novel, the reader can easily apprehend how

women were promoted for marriage as if they were goods; and the way in which their marriages were negotiated was highly affected by the impressions both the bride and the bridegroom parties endeavour to give.

When Zuhra started her journey looking for a wife who might suit her wealthy son and the social class to which her family belongs, she "took sweets, fruits and flowers in abundance" to show off her family wealth and create the desired impression. On the other hand, the bride's people had to give the impression that their daughter was "given to a rich man" (Hussain, 2018, 26). Due to the traditional importance of the betrothal ceremony and the show off which accompanies it, "even a poor Muslim spends one or two months' income on that day and does not mind suffering on account of it for several months after" (Hussain, 2018, 60). However, such behaviors from both the bride and bridegroom parties are against Islam and its teachings. Prophet Mohammed is quoted as saying, "If someone comes to you with whose religion and trust worthiness you are pleased, get him married. If you do not, there will be discord and great corruption in the earth" (Hoffman-Ladd, 1992, 84).

On the contrary, the material aspects related to both bride and bridegroom are emphasized, while morals and religious commitment, which Islam affirmed within its principles, are overlooked. Furthermore, it would be deemed shameful that a prospective bride candidly talks about or sets the conditions that could impact her marital future. Although Islam emphatically emphasizes that women's rights within marriage should always be preserved by referring to them explicitly in the marriage contract, traditions have denied women their basic rights as wives. Thus, the considered disgrace resulting from securing a bride's rights is due to following cultural and traditional norms, particularly in the Indian Muslim communities. It bears no relation to religion.

To illuminate the importance of the marriage contract, Hussain expressly explicated the binding conditions on both bride and bridegroom, and stressed their inclusion in the marriage contract to formally safeguard Muslim women's rights. The marriage contract between Kabeer and his third wife, Maghbool, included such conditions. Maghbool's character and her status in her in-law's house were different from that of Kabeer's other

wives. In fact, this is what made her marriage contract different from that of the rest of Kabeer's other wives. Maghbool represents the writer's voice in the novel. On her tongue, Iqbalunnisa Hussain strove to raise awareness among members of her Muslim society, in an attempt to rectify some outdated customs that deprived women of their most basic rights.

Maghbool is introduced as "an institution in herself" (Hussain, 2018, 139). She was well enlightened and a "beauty according to the feminine estimation", a "good organizer" and an "economical manager" of her parents' house (Hussain, 2018, 139). She was the secretary, accountant and the right hand of her father, who regarded her as a son. She was also accomplished in music, painting, needlework and designing. "Everything she did was self-learnt, and she did it so exquisitely that an expert in that art would say that she had reached a fair level of perfection" (Hussain, 2018, 139-140).

Since Maghbool did not believe in outmoded traditions, her marriage contract included certain conditions that offered her some control over her life, particularly what made her financially independent. Such conditions, in turn, bestowed upon Maghbool the reverence and apprehension of her husband, whose last two wives did not count in his life, because he regarded one as "only a servant" and the other was "a ghost" (Hussain, 2018, 147). As stated in the marriage contract, Kabeer gave Maghbool her Mahar (dowry) "in advance" (Hussain, 2018, 147). He also had one of his houses registered in her name so that she could buy whatever she wanted out of the house rent. She did not have to ask her husband or her mother-in-law for money. In contrast, Kabeer gave nothing to his other three wives, except "what they got at the time of their weddings" (Hussain, 2018, 147).

In total contrast to Maghbool was Munira, Kabeer's second wife. She was introduced in the novel as an ugly, poor and uncultivated woman, who lacked confidence in herself. She took women's plight as the norm that Muslim believing women had to tolerate. Her extremely pliable character and her complete subservience to other's wishes made her easily exploitable. She incessantly toiled for her in-laws, and meekly accepted both the erratic attention and usual neglect of her polygamous husband (Roye, 2020). Munira constantly bore the insults heaped upon her. Being so, she was introduced as the prototypical example of the traditional Muslim wife, who was a silent sufferer.

Like many other married women who were deprived of their basic rights in their in-laws' household, Munira had to do her daily exhausting domestic work although she was in her last days of pregnancy. Giving birth to her son, she was expected to resume her household work two days after the parturition. "We people get up to work from the third day. Coolies work from the same day. She [Munira] belongs to our class and will resume her duties from the day after to-morrow", the cook replied to Maghbool's question concerning the postpartum period Munira could stay beside childbed (Hussain, 2018, 184).

Munira was treated "worse than a servant" by her husband's family members, who hated even to touch her clothes. They "either kick or push [her clothes] with a stick" if they come across them (Hussain, 2018, 183). As stated by Maghbool, Munira had no power to think, and as a result she lived like a machine. Unlike her rival Maghbool, whose marriage contract secured her some power and independence, Munira was "treated worse than a dog [in her in-laws'], yet she is not unhappy" (Hussain, 2018, 188).

Accordingly, Maghbool and Munira dramatically signify two opposite reactions to male's authority. They symbolize two utterly different types of Muslim woman. Munira is portrayed as the archetype of the submissive Muslim wife, who blindly conforms to male's domination, whereas Maghbool is depicted as the "rebel", who firmly protests and rejects all kinds of injustice practiced against women in the name of Islam. By delineating Munira and Maghbool's characters in such a way, Hussain attempts to obviously state the real problems of Muslim married women, and at the same time suggests possible solutions that may help to reduce their suffering.

2.2.5. Polygamy as an Islamic Patriarchal Institution

The language of the Qur'an is so rhetorical and eloquent that it renders so many of its *Ayat* (verses/texts) almost impossible to understand, particularly by poorly cultivated people. Hence, the interpretation of the Qur'an has been a necessity over centuries, and Muslim scholars are still researching and deciphering its invisible meanings, implicit messages and/or instructions to Muslims. It must also be noted that the interpretation of the Qur'an has exclusively been carried out by male scholars and, although most of them have on the whole been well-meaning and erudite, they "have reflected their own times, cultures and assumptions" (Hogben, 2010). In addition, they have echoed their

conservative patriarchal societies with all their outmoded inherited traditions, most of which are originally unrelated to Islam and its teachings, as was explained before.

Therefore, in the same way purdah was enforced on Muslim women by misinterpreting the Qur'anic *Ayat*, Muslim scholars more often refer to a Qur'anic text, out of its immediate context, to justify polygamy. They extract a part of the third *Aya* (singular form of *Ayat*) of chapter four, notably entitled *el Nisa'* (the Arabic word for 'women'), which says: "marry women as may be agreeable to you, two, or three, or four" (Qur'an 4:3). However, they overlook, or rather disregarded, the first and last part of the same *Aya*, or the other *Ayat* in the same chapter of the Qur'an, which precede and follow the aforementioned *Aya* and explicate it. Paradoxically, there is general consensus among Muslim scholars that the *Ayat* in the Qur'an are placed in such a way that they elucidate one another, while also complementing or clarifying one another. The extracted part of the *Aya* which allows Muslim men to marry up to four women is concurrently preceded and followed by certain conditions. The conditional statement that comes immediately before this part of the *Aya* reads as follows: "And if you fear that you will not be fair in dealing with the orphans, then […]", while the one that directly comes afterwards says: "and if you fear you will not deal justly, then *marry only* one or what your right hands possess. That is the nearest *way* for you to avoid injustice" (Qur'an 4:3, emphasis in original). The complete *Aya* then reads:

> And if you feel that you will not be unfair in dealing with the orphans, then marry women as may be agreeable to you, two, or three, or four; and if you fear you will not deal justly, then *marry only* one or what your right hands possess. That is the nearest *way* for you to avoid injustice. (Qur'an 4:3)

Actually, the preceding chapter of the Qur'an (chapter three) renders this message even clearer by giving some more contextual details. Additionally, there is consensus among Muslim scholars that there is always a cause behind the revelation of each and every *Aya* (verse) in the Qur'an. The cause of revelation is the specific event that prompted any *Aya* or *Surah* (chapter) of the Qur'an. In simple terms, something happened on earth and, because of it, God revealed a verse of the Qur'an to instruct his prophet.

Thus, to better understand any *Aya* in the Qur'an we should investigate its context and cause of revelation. Chapter four builds on chapter three, which is concerned with the Battle of Uhud and its aftermath. It is a very famous battle between early Muslims and the inhabitants of Mecca, in which a very high number of Muslim men were killed, leaving so many widows and orphans behind. As a matter of fact, this context has been crucial whenever polygamy has been discussed in Islam. To put it simply, Muslim men were allowed to have up to four wives in order to remedy the social problem resulting from such unusual conditions. The purpose behind granting Muslim men permission to marry multiple wives, as revealed in the third *Aya* of chapter four, was thus to tackle the problem of widows and female orphans who had lost the protection of their dead husbands and fathers. Permitting polygamy, therefore, was the result of God's concern for the welfare of Muslim women rather than a privilege bestowed upon men. It was not about men's sexuality, as many might think, but rather about women and children's welfare.

A contemporary example that shows that polygamy is only allowed in transient and extraordinary circumstances is the fact that Muslim men are encouraged to remarry the increasing number of widows resulting from the war on ISIS in Iraq and Syria after 2014. Muslim scholars began to urge Muslim men to remarry the widows of their community as a demonstration of solidarity and recognition of the sacrifices of their husbands, who had died defending their homeland. The ultimate aim of such invitation for polygamy was to offer the widows and their children the protection they needed. At the same time, ISIS leaders and clerics, who claim to follow Fundamental Islamist Sharia (Islamic Law), urge the members of their organization to marry multiple wives in order to sustain their organization by providing new blood to fight for what they believe in.

According to Alia Hogben (2010), the third *Aya* in chapter four of the Qur'an was revealed to make it clear that Muslim widows and female orphans were in need of protection and maintenance, and that this could only be granted through marriage which, together with purdah, as was explained before, distinguished Muslim women under male protection from those who were publicly available. Consequently, a careful reading of the first and last ignored parts of the same *Aya* clearly shows that polygamy should be seen as God's temporal solution to protect vulnerable widows and orphans whose guardians had

been killed in the Battle of Uhud. However, it must be noted that this was allowed providing that fair treatment of all wives was guaranteed. "And if you fear you will not deal justly, then *marry only* one" (Qur'an 4:3). Moreover, *Aya* 129 in the same chapter makes no secret of the fact that the possibility of treating wives equally and fairly is most unlikely, "And you cannot keep perfect balance between wives, however much you may desire it" (Qur'an 4:129). By emphasizing the impossibility of ensuring justice for all the wives, *Aya* 129 offers some more evidence from the Qur'an that polygamy can easily become a reprehensible deed, which should thus be avoided in normal circumstances. Significantly enough, *Aya* 129 is often overlooked and disregarded by most Muslim scholars.

Iqbalunnisa Hussain was among the first Muslim feminists who elaborated on the prevalence of polygamy amongst Muslims in many Indian communities, and on the subsequent unfortunate consequences that it brought about. Like most Muslim feminists, she rejected the biased interpretation of the Qur'anic texts, which was intended to generalize polygamy and other oppressive practices to keep women subjugated. As regards the origin of polygamy and the reasons behind the spread of this practice, she stated that in addition to many women's debased status, illiteracy and ignorance, the desire to have more male children and acquire more public respect were the chief causes behind plural marriage in the pre-Islamic era (Hussain, 2015, 26). The more wives a man had, the more vigorous and manly he was in the eyes of his people. This is the way in which a man was, and still is looked at, particularly in rural communities amongst the poorly cultivated peoples. Hussain also stated that polygamy was believed to be necessary for the survival and perpetuation of the nation, because more wives would lead to more male descendants. Such a belief was sustained even after the advent of Islam, but in a limited fashion among the true Islam believers.

Hussain also made it clear that plural marriage was approved to address a social problem when there was no alternative solution to support helpless women and orphans, but that this concession was taken out of its true content and actual purpose as stipulated in the Qur'an for the exclusive benefit of man. She affirmed that, at that time, Muslim men were "guilty of double injustice" towards those poor females who had lost their guardians in frequent wars (Hussain, 2015, 36); they, who declared themselves responsible for their

welfare, did not give them or their children a share of their husbands' property, nor did they offer to marry these helpless widows. They were afraid of the "responsibility of maintenance" as the "widows, being illiterate, were not in a position to earn their livings" (Hussain, 2015, 37).

Any reformer in such circumstances, Hussain goes on to argue, "would have been morally bound to support the weakest of humanity, irrespective of the interests of the members of his sex" (37). Only restricted polygamy could solve this problem, because the principles of Islam strictly prohibit illicit relationships between men and women. Hussain concludes that the conditional statements in the third *Aya* of chapter four, where the permission to marry up to four wives was mentioned, definitely disclose the fact that there was no polygamy in Islam, and that monogamy was the norm; monogamy is the rule in Islam and polygamy is only an exception allowed under certain conditions. This is ironically tackled in chapter five of her novel, when it is said that man's "polygamous nature has an excuse: a man doing brave deeds needs every sacrifice by others" (Hussain, 2018, 49), whereas woman, who "does not show the proper spirit of gulping down ready-made beliefs[,] is condemned by the rest as douzakhi (hellish)" (Hussain, 2018, 49).

According to Barlas (2019), the misogynist interpretation of the Qur'an is not only restricted to purdah and women's almost non-existent social role in public, but it also extends to limit women's rights in those "most intimate of human institutions, marriage and the family of that marriage" (51). This reading of the Qur'an empowered the husband, entitled him to own his wife and children, and gave him the right to "abuse, even murder, family members" (51). This can be clearly seen in the plight undergone by Kabeer's four wives, particularly in the way in which they were regarded as their husband's "property" (Hussain, 2018, 62). The narrator explicitly comments on the disparity in power between a husband and his wife: "A man faces his opponent with hatred and may even kill him. A woman's attitude towards a powerful antagonist is fear and submission" (Hussain, 2018, 114).

Hussain's novel systematically brings to light the restrictions imposed on women and the unjust treatment they receive, particularly in a polygamous marriage. Kabeer was

"worried about [his wife's] physical beauty"; yet, the question of fair treatment "never struck him" (Hussain, 2018, 31). While he brought her "fruits and sweets" against the will of his mother and without her knowledge (Hussain, 2018, 51), he despised his second wife and treated her worse than a servant or a dog (Hussain, 2018, 183, 188). When he married his third wife, Kabeer deserted and despised his first two wives to give his new one all his love and consideration. Addressing Maghbool, he states, "I sacrificed everybody else for you. I discarded them all before I came to you" (Hussain, 2018, 146). However, all the kindness, romance and consideration he shows to her disappear as soon as he decides to marry his fourth wife. "From the time I married that rebel, Maghbool, everything I do has gone wrong and I have suffered nothing but loss", he says to his faithful friend, Mustafa (Hussain, 2018, 257). Kabeer is full of bitterness as a result of living with his first three wives:

> The house is a hell for me. I don't know what is a happy home where one forgets his worries and gets relaxation from the ills of the cruel world. I can call none sincere to me and no one whom I take for a real sympathizer. When I begin to have confidence in one to my surprise I find that she falls short of my expectations. I have made up my mind not to bring the girl [his fourth new wife] to this wretched house and contaminate her in the company of those murderers. The house where she is now though small seems to have the world of peace and happiness. There I am certain of getting my wounds healed. (Hussain, 2018, 260)

Soon afterwards, the novel ironically comments on Kabeer's particular concept of justice:

> Kabeer's sense of the justice of his behaviour after his fourth marriage had reached the peak. It seemed to him as illuminating, as unfallacious as the morning star. He said to himself that he lived exclusively with his first wife for some years, and he did the same with the second and the third. If he did not do the same with the fourth he would be doing her an injustice. Doing justice to one's wife is compulsory as it is laid down in the holy book and was emphasized by the originator of Islam. (Hussain, 2018, 279)

To convince himself and justify his unjustifiable fourth marriage to a gorgeous yet poor young girl, Kabeer resorts to the biased interpretation of the selected Qur'anic *Aya*, as was explained before. Having little knowledge of Islam and its sources, Kabeer attributes to Prophet Mohammed a saying he never uttered regarding plural marriage. "Four is an auspicious number, otherwise Mohammed (peace be on him) would not have fixed it. […]. I have volunteered to help a helpless woman. […]. This marriage definitely is not for my own sake but is meant to help an unfortunate creature", Kabeer says to himself (Hussain, 2018, 258). Once again, the patriarchal reading of the Qur'an that puts the emphasis on the extracted part of the third *Aya* of chapter four justifying plural marriages for men is upheld, whereas *Aya* 129, which emphasizes the improbability of treating multiple wives equally, is largely ignored. It is men's sexuality that matters rather than the welfare of Muslim poor women like Noorjahan, his young fourth wife.

Islamic scholars, like the Indian reformist-writer and social activist Asghar Ali Engineer (2005, 2008), explained that Qur'anic revelations were contextual and normative, and that, although the message of the Qur'an is on the whole eternal, the context has changed so much that Islamic rules should be reconsidered with a view to meeting the present-day conditions of Muslim societies. To give another example, slavery prevailed in Muslim communities long time ago, and this explains why it was permitted in at least twenty nine *Ayat* of the Qur'an. In the past, Muslim men were not only allowed to have slaves, but they were also entitled to have sexual intercourse with their female ones (referred to as "what your right hands possess" in the aforementioned *Aya*). Such affairs were never regarded as adulterous or sinful (Saad, 1990, 242). Additionally, unlike the religiously restricted number of wives, which is four, there was no religious or legal limitation to the number of female slaves a Muslim man could have. As a result, most enslaved women were treated as concubines, and wealthy Muslim men could have as many of them as they wished in addition to the four wives to whom they were entitled.

However, no decent Muslim would accept or justify slavery in the contemporary world. Consequently, although the Qur'an does not eradicate slavery, the parts in which this issue is tackled should be deemed obsolete. Similarly, polygamy should not be understood as a "God-given right" for Muslim men, because it is no longer a "means of

protecting women or providing for them" (Hogben, 2010). Polygamy should be seen as contextual, in contrast to monogamy, the norm in the present-day world. Engineer (2005) and Hogben (2010), for their part, also reject the argument that men's sexual desire should be gratified by multiple wives, and completely disagree with those who claim that the sexual needs of men and women are different. Accordingly, the interpretation of the Islamic sources on which polygamy and other oppressive practices were based should be rethought in accordance with today's context. Polygamy was a "contextual provision" in the Qur'an, and cannot be regarded as an "eternal privilege of men" (Engineer, 2005, 21); only will this rethinking lead to the Islamic ideal of equality between the sexes.

In contrast, some Muslim scholars argue that polygamy, as an Islamic institution, takes into account the social and psychological limitations inherent in man. According to Philips and Jones (2005), for example, men 'naturally' get married for the purpose of gratifying their physical and psychological needs, which are met by the companionship of females. They also claim that a man may marry in his early youth, i.e. immature, to later on discover that the woman he chose to be his wife is unsuitable as he no longer finds happiness and contentment with her, or that her interests are widely different from his. After a long period of married life, a man may lose interest in his wife and long for a change, very often in an attempt to find a younger and more beautiful woman. In some other cases, a man may eventually find out that the woman he married is barren. In such circumstances, these critics argue, many non-Muslim men would deem it necessary to "divorce [their wives] or indulge in extramarital relationships in order to be with a more compatible person or a person able to bear his children" (55). In clear opposition to this, though, Islam supports family unity: it encourages men to go on living with their wives, but on the other hand allows them to gratify their desires in a second marriage.

Hussain's novel counters these arguments by claiming that "unequal distribution of labour and regard is the social code made by man in his own interest" (Hussain, 2018, 49), which results in "man being both the legislator and executor [who] has brought in laws to suit his interests" (Hussain, 2018, 114). As Malak Amin (2005) argues, in *Purdah and Polygamy* Iqbalunnisa Hussain shows that polygamy is a fact of life in the "specific privileged milieu depicted, with its rationale and fair application cautiously questioned"

(31). In fact, this is what appears to be the major motivation for Kabeer, the polygamous wealthy man who governs a household of four wives, namely, to satisfy his sexual and social desires at the expense of the suffering of women with whom he could not deal fairly. As was explained before, fair and equitable treatment of wives is a *sine qua non* condition clearly prescribed in the Qur'an. Being married to a beautiful and fecund woman, Kabeer had no justification whatsoever to marry the second, third and fourth wife. This could explain why he concealed them from the public, and even his own family. The inclusion of this character in the novel makes a clear case against polygamy; like other Muslim feminists, Hussain affirms that the revelation of the Qur'an that permits polygamy was only included to address a very specific social problem. Not in vain did she name her polygamous protagonist *Kabeer*, which means *grand*: in this way, the superiority that patriarchy unjustly bestowed upon him is brought to the fore. As is sarcastically stated, in a way that clearly brings to mind Jane Austen's irony:

> It is a well-known fact that man is superior to woman in every respect. He is a representative of God on earth and being born with His light in him deserves the respect and obedience that he demands. He is not expected to show his gratitude or even a kind word of appreciation to a woman: it is his birthright to get everything from her. "Might is right" is the policy of this world. (Hussain, 2018, 49)

Muslim men, particularly in the rural and poorly educated communities, feel mighty and important if they keep women in a lower position. Women's servitude and mute submission are the best means to show their preponderance in such communities. Kabeer could be taken as an example of this attitude: he had no other motives than his own sexual and social whims. His subsequent marriages could also be interpreted as an act of revenge against his first wife; when she turns to her mother seeking solace, the latter exclaims: "[t]he harm a husband usually threatens his wife with has already been done. What more can a women have than a rival at home?" (Hussain, 2018, 172).

Purdah and Polygamy became very influential with regard to its treatment of polygamy. It could be argued that it somehow contributed to reducing this practice in the late 1940s. However, other patriarchal oppressive practices, such as the inferior status of

females within their families and society at large, their economic and financial subjugation, and the strict restrictions on their education, employment and even movement, stayed firmly in place (Kirmani, 2018). Although Hussain did not resist patriarchy in a revolutionary way, in her novel she invited Muslim women to revolt against all these oppressive practices, as when it reads:

> He has monopolised freedom and luxury. A woman has no right to question even when she is wronged. She must retaliate now. No one will blame her. Her cause is right and just. It is not practical for a woman, specially a Muslim girl. She is weak both bodily and mentally and should be kept under restrictions. A woman discards a man only when she has someone else to take his place. Whose fault is it? If she were given the same education and training she would have been quite a different person to-day. The flaw lies not in her but in man who keeps her a slave all her life in his own interest. His selfishness is responsible for her helplessness. (Hussain, 2018, 49)

While purdah robs Muslim women of visibility and freedom, polygamy renders them bereft of individuality and dignity. In *Changing India:* A *Muslim Woman Speaks,* Hussain affirmed: "In a polygamous marriage, a woman is called upon to live in an environment which invades her private life. She is compelled to subordinate all her instincts and emotions to the repressive environment (2015, 221-22). According to Hussain, equality cannot be expected in a polygamous household, since women's status under such circumstances almost always implies moral and physical degradation: "the very purpose of marriage is perverted as those endearing charities that flow from personal fidelity to one another and which lend sanctity to the marriage tie, are replaced by jealousy, selfishness, and quarrelsomeness" (Hussain, 2015, 66). Consequently, polygamous marriage ruins all the essential domestic virtues necessary to ensure harmony between a husband and his wife and the right environment to bring up happy children.

2.3. Indian Modernism and Muslim Women's Progression

The tension between the traditional Muslim zenana and a conceivably reconfigured modern female space became an overarching concern for many Indian female writers, who

did their best to develop an English-language narrative tradition during the first half of the twentieth century. However, little attention was paid to such writers despite the recently noticed interest in critical writing on India. Taking into account that literary works are the medium that most powerfully mirror the experiences that leave indelible imprints on people's lives, and that literature provides an alternative reading of history, it is clear that the development of such a new genre in Indian literature drew its markers and styles from the surroundings from which it emerged.

As has been stated by Berman (2013), the extraordinary period that witnessed the growth, both in number and variety, of Indian fictional works written in English can be seen as the point when "modernism emerge[d]" in India (206). Bearing in mind the colonization period and its huge impact on the social, political and economic life in the country, one can argue that western ways influenced feminist Indian authors in general, and notably those who decided to write in English. However, it must also be taken into account that Indian Muslim communities were known for being extremely conservative and traditional. Therefore, authors sometimes found it difficult to reconcile their society with some of the western ideas that could contribute to improving it. Like feminism, modernity in India, as in other parts of the globe, took on different forms and styles due to the different hues of the large and diversified Indian society.

It is also well known that the western modernist movement brought to literature, particularly to the genre of the novel, many distinguishing characteristics, such as stream of consciousness and fragmentation. However, such characteristics were not employed in most Indian novels written in English. To prove their novelistic skills and distinguish themselves from western novelists, many Indian writers employed their own techniques. Hussain's *Purdah and Polygamy*, for instance, has its own "sophisticated use of irony, its play with temporal order, its focus on the lives of non-elite people, and its embrace of an often hybrid version of Indian English – one which draws on local languages and habits of speech" (Berman, 2018, 15). Hussain brilliantly employed all of these techniques to demonstrate the novel's "sophisticated aesthetic responses to Indian modernity and connect it to other experimental English language writers of the period" (Berman, 2018, 15).

Muslim Indian novelists were deeply steeped in western literature. However, although they, whether consciously or unconsciously, borrowed some tools and forms from it, in the end they wrote their novels within an Islamic local framework, which is almost incompatible with western modernity. Many sadly out-of-print novelists, such as Aubrey Menen, Sudhin Ghose and Iqbalunnisa Hussain, among others, "forged modernist textual responses to the challenges of India's colonial status, its changing economy, and its modernizing roles for men, women, and their families, and used modernist narration to explore ethical and political perspectives on Indian life" (Berman, 2013, 206). Like most of the works written by these authors, Iqbalunnisa Hussain's *Purdah and Polygamy* exhibited a striking range of options for Muslim women, who were mired in old religious traditions, separated by purdah and unprepared to indulge themselves in modern life at that time.

In this novel, Hussain introduced ordinary Muslim heroines who struggled against strict traditions, despite the fact that they often chose to remain secluded within their domestic spheres. Simultaneously, she introduced the zenana as a contested sphere which Muslim women endeavored to reshape in a way that diverges from outmoded traditions. They also tried to create porous boundaries between the private and the public realms, and point to significant ties between domesticity and the life of the Muslim nation as a whole. In so doing, Hussain did not only introduce the Indian complex version of modernity, but she also responded to the contextual demands of Muslim communities with a view to highlighting Muslim women's plight in relation to the local and global change induced by the changing times.

Like other contemporary writers, Hussain strove to represent her rapidly evolving world and its challenges. Not only did she investigate political issues in a colonial context, such as citizenship and subjectivity, but she also addressed social matters in order to improve Muslim family life in general and the conditions of women in particular. According to Berman (2018), Indian novels in English, "in their very exploration of issues of gender, religion, and domesticity, become important entries in the developing tradition of Indian writing in English as well as crucial markers of the complex variety of global modernisms" (15).

Hussain employed her own style in *Purdah and Polygamy*. Besides the gaps in knowledge, often presented unapologetically, one can clearly see how the narrator leaps from one perspective to another at several points. For instance, the first five chapters of the novel make it clear that all the female characters in the zenana were strictly following the confining tradition. It seems that they neither had the possibility nor the will to leave such an oppressive environment. Nevertheless, the rest of the novel disrupts such expectations. Similarly, Zuhra's point of view regarding polygamy seems to preside over the first part of the narration, "[w]hy do people bring daughters-in-law if not to have real and well-earned comfort?" (Hussain, 2018, 50), to be later on countered by Nazni's brother's rather different view on polygamy; he believed that "it is a blessing to make a woman independent and strong irrespective of man's interest", and further remarked that "it is a crime to leave her in a dejected, hopeless and helpless condition" (Hussain, 2018, 115). The reader can also observe Zuhra's resentment against Nazni's going to the cinema, and how "her blood boiled" when she realized that all "her teachings had no value" for her son (Hussain, 2018, 59). In contrast to this, Nazni's brother defended his sister against her husband's bitterness, "You shouldn't try to mould your wife's life according to your mother's" (Hussain, 2018, 59). He goes on to ask, "Has she no rights? Should she be a product of circumstances, a puppet without feeling and life? Should she be a mere machine, an unpaid servant doing certain duties for the food and clothing she gets?" (Hussain, 2018, 116). He also demands that Nanzi should not be compelled to return to the zenana. For Nazni's brother, the "old women's world is quite different from [theirs]" because these old women "have neither desires nor strength to take part in life's enjoyments" (Hussain, 2018, 58), and tells Kabeer, his brother-in-law, that "hundreds of Muslim women go [to the cinema] these days", indicating that modernity has begun to reclaim its due in Muslim society.

At some points in the novel, the reader is abruptly dropped into the mind of a character, and the narrative goes back in time to be resumed from a different point of view. This particularly happens upon moving from one chapter to another. Chapter eight, for instance, ends with the approval of Kabeer's family of plural marriage, while chapter nine begins with the completely different perspective of Nazni's family, who firmly disapprove of polygamy, "Nazni's family thought about the remarriage very differently from Kabeer's people" (Hussain, 2018, 112). Such inclusion of divergent perspectives testifies to the style

and techniques with which the author intends to disrupt the narrative, so conventional apparently.

To pit traditionalism against modernity, Hussain introduced Maghbool, Kabeer's third wife, as an independent, educated, wealthy and "accomplished girl [who] could run an estate" (Hussain, 2018, 188). Maghbool is thus endowed with characteristics that a traditional woman lacked, thus becoming the embodiment of the emerging Indian modern woman. Being different from Kabeer's other wives, Maghbool was immediately granted her own private territory within the zenana, where she led an active life reading, writing and singing. Unlike other women in the zenana, she was daily visited by her male cousin. Maghbool was keen to meet her cousin in her room daily because he represented the link between her and the modern world outside the traditional zenana. Not surprisingly Zuhra, Maghbool's mother-in-law and most traditional and conservative character in the novel, complained that "entertaining her cousin is more important to her than her husband's food" (Hussain, 2018, 234). As a modern woman, Maghbool was the "*son*", "*secretary*" and "*right hand*" of her father (Hussain, 2018, 139, emphasis added). Maghbool is equaled to man and, in consequence, is rendered incapable of fulfilling the role of an ideal traditional wife who, like her rival Munira, accepts being a conformist servant in her husband's house.

According to Berman (2012), *Purdah and Polygamy* rejects the idea of espousing the "traditional domesticity as a virtue and the home as the bastion of resistance to modernity" (192). She claims that, as is shown in the novel, "women need not leave the zenana to raise concerns of national import and that their emerging modernity develops by way of their participation in traditional sites and rhetorical practices" (143). Moreover, Hussain ironic tone often serves to undermine the inclination to characterize Muslim women's quarters as the center of nostalgia for the traditional life of Muslim Indians.

Burton (2003) in turn believes that the kitchen became the site for a "contest over modernization" at that time (as cited in Berman, 2012, 130). According to this critic, this contest barely began in the kitchen of Dilkusha, where the daughters-in-law must be necessarily present. In *Purdah and Polygamy*, the kitchen was subjected to the controlling gaze of patriarchy as represented by the figure of the mother-in-law. Despite its potential

to raise communal awareness, the central and shared kitchen there remained the bastion that resisted modernity and change. This also justifies why Maghbool, the more modern female character, refused to identify with the kitchen, such a traditional space. Similarly, unlike other women in Dilkusha, Maghbool's financial independence enabled her to buy the food she needed instead of cooking it in the kitchen. "I don't ask those beggars for anything. My father brought the rent for my house" (Hussain, 2018, 197), Maghbool retorted when Munira asked her how she could feed herself if she did not cook her food. Maghbool is thus introduced as a modern and bourgeois woman in Hussain's novel. When Munira heard that Maghbool had a bank account, she was surprised and exclaimed: "How disgraceful! Then all the men know your name" […] "What is the use of living in purdah when your name is pronounced by strangers?" (Hussain, 2018, 197). Furthermore, Maghbool spent a great amount of her money trying to publish a collection of poems she had written and had her name attached to the collection. In so doing, she somehow 'usurped' a masculine role, one of the most distinguishing characteristics of a modern woman.

When Maghbool spilt boiling water on her body in a kitchen accident, however, she was rendered a disposable wife because her beauty had got damaged by the scars left on her body. Maghbool thus became unsuitable, both in the kitchen and as a love object, and her potential to shatter the "complacency" of the women who inhabit the zenana and "disrupt the gendered roles" of the household in Dilkusha was increasingly "revealed" and "contained" (Berman, 2012, 135); she was "ostracized almost into nonexistence" (2012, 135).

Despite the conservative Muslim environment prevailing in Dilkusha, the main setting of the novel, some change of attitude can be noticed in the behaviour of some of the main characters: Nazni's going to the cinema, Kabeer's modern attitude regarding money, Maghbool's financial independence and authorship, and the disruption of the usually quiet environment of the zenana indicate that modernity has somehow crept into the life of those who inhabit Dilkusha. Moreover, the author's play with the temporal order and structure of the novel partly aligns it with modernist aesthetics. The use of multiple perspectives, together with the disruption of the formal unity, combine with the author's severe critique

of traditional practices, such as purdah and polygamy, in such a way that it subtly echoes the modernist ethos. In contrast, the contest to win the podium of the ideal wife within a polygamous ménage is described as almost impossible. This is why none of the female characters can be clearly identified as the protagonist of the novel. Hussain introduces multiple perspectives within the zenana as an alternative to the figure of the exclusively individual woman. Maghbool's failure to reconcile herself with the Muslim female community, together with her abrupt departure immediately after her husband's death, testify to the disparity between modernity and the conservative Muslim community in Dilkusha.

Through its female community and shifting perspectives, Hussain's novel somehow suggests that the strict control of and utter reliance on men can be replaced by women's solidarity and independence within a Muslim household, which might eventually dovetail into their subsequent empowerment. Such a change can be seen at the very end of the novel, when "Nazni achieved the coveted position" after the death of both her husband, Kabeer, and Zuhra (Hussain, 2018, 310). Unlike her mother-in-law, Nazni, who became the new head of the zenana, was more tolerant and less strict when dealing with the rest of the women.

By way of conclusion, it can be said that the novel's multiple perspectives, ironic tone and narrative disorder allow us to understand, not only women's domestic, social and political conditions in the advent of modernity, but they also enable us to realize what all of these changes implied in a conservative Muslim household. To keep herself in a safe zone and offer the reader the chance to pass his/her own judgment, Hussain exhibits the rights a modern woman could enjoy, while also bringing to the fore how severely criticized by conservative Muslims such rights could be.

Chapter 3

3.1. El Saadawi's Social Life

A pioneer voice of feminism in Egypt and the Middle East, gynecologist, psychiatrist, theorist, reformist, educator and novelist Nawal El Saadawi was born in Kafir Talha, a small village outside Cairo on the 27th of October 1931 (Abouzeid, 2016, 537). Like Iqbalunnisa Hussain, Nawal was born into a huge family. The second among nine children, she spent her childhood and early adolescence in this rural area, where she enjoyed contemplating its green fields and fascinating nature. Like Leila Aboulela's, her mother was an upper-class woman, while her father was the only son to his poor mother, whom El Saadawi greatly admired. Her paternal grandmother bravely rejected women's subjugation in public, a behaviour rarely seen in a conservative Muslim community (Golley, 2010, 131). It is worth mentioning that, in the twentieth and early twenty first centuries, the obligation to honour the male members in the family increased to such an extent that "any imagined slight against his honour by a female family member may call for her murder" (Barlas, 2019, 9).

Breaking with strict patriarchal traditions, El Saadawi's grandmother used to courageously challenge *al-Umda* (the head of the village). She brandished her hand in his face, angrily crying out against his orders, "we are not slaves" (El Saadawi, 1992, 7). However, El Saadawi's grandmother lacked the medium (i.e. education) she needed to argue that Islam also respected women. Raised by parents of two different classes, El Saadawi was always proud to proclaim that she had been very fortunate to grow up in an atmosphere that encouraged education and knowledge.

Unlike other girls in her traditional Muslim village, El Saadawi constantly showed her gratitude to her progressive father, who always offered her a good amount of freedom and encouraged her to pursue her education. Her alignment with her father, rather than her mother, somehow meant an "alliance with working class positions" (Golley, 2010, 132). Issues of class divisions, which were vividly felt in the families of poor peasants like hers, were always El Saadawi's focus (Golley, 2010, 132). She was more sympathetic towards her paternal relatives than her upper-class maternal ones. Such an inclination shows in all her literary works, as she usually associates women's status in conservative Muslim

societies with that of lower-class people and slaves, who were deprived of their essential rights on account of reactionary traditions and the misinterpretation of Islamic texts.

El Saadawi's family looked forward to moving up the social ladder, from the lower class of the peasantry to the higher class of governmental employees. Her father was the first in the village to attain higher education and take off the traditional rural costumes to put on the suit and tie when he was appointed general controller of education for the province of Menoufia in the Delta region to the north of Cairo (El Saadawi, 2006, 7-8). Like young Iqbalunnisa Hussain, El Saadawi saw women's suffering and their struggle for survival in a society that crushed women under patriarchal conventions, further reinforced by the misuse of religion. The "sombre-clad" Egyptian women, as described by Cooper (2018), were seen covered with an "ugly veil and grotesque nosepiece" and carrying on a "flat-bottomed cart drawn by a much decorated donkey" (44).

In her description of the local women, El Saadawi wrote: "beneath the smiles of the women I could detect the sadness, the tears that had dried over the years, the gloom which enveloped memories of their wedding night" (as cited in Aptheker, 2009, x). Like most females in conservative Muslim communities, El Saadawi experienced the violence of patriarchy, which was usually justified on allegedly religious grounds. In 1937, when she was only six, she underwent circumcision (a polite term for female genital mutilation), an operation which had no roots in Islam at all. As is well known, female circumcision is a traditional ritual consisting in cutting or removing some or all of the external female genitalia. It was, and is still, practiced in certain Muslim communities, particularly in Egypt and Sudan. It is allegedly intended to protect women's chastity by depriving them of sexual pleasure, because it causes sexual frigidity.

As has been stated by Badran, "the imposition of FGM (female genital mutilation) has been one of many mechanisms of control over women which helps sustain patriarchal power" (2009, 168). Female circumcision was falsely promoted in some traditional Muslim societies as a means whereby God honored Muslims by preserving their females' purity, which basically represents the honor of men and the whole family (BahadlKhafaja, 2017, 34-35). In her *Believing Women in Islam*, Barlas (2019) has also stated that, in some

Muslim societies, "female genital cutting, stoning, and sexual assaults are authorized based on conservative and patriarchal readings of the Qur'ān, even though there is no mention of such practices in the text itself" (9).

Moreover, FGM is not practiced in some of the most conservative Muslim countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan under Taliban rule. This actually indicates that, instead of following true Islamic teachings, religion is practiced in accordance with traditions and conventions, many of which were brought from other non-Muslim cultures. In the same vein, Wadud has pointed out that "knowing what factors cause which restrictions on women in concert with their interpretation and implementation of textual sources indicates that patriarchal practices among Muslims reflect some things other than the religious sources themselves (2006, 77).

Notwithstanding this, since circumcision was practiced under religious pretexts in certain Muslim communities, all females were subjected to it regardless of their social class and/or the place where they lived, i.e. in a big city or in the country. El Saadawi described the horrible moments of circumcision, "I screamed with pain despite the tight hand held over my mouth, for the pain was not just a pain, it was like a searing flame that went through my whole body" (El Saadawi, 1980, 8). Nightmares similar to the painful incident of her circumcision haunted El Saadawi, especially during the period that she, as a medical doctor, spent in the rural areas where this practice was widely spread. She said that circumcision destroyed her childhood once and for all. It "deprived [her] during [her] youth and for many years of married life of enjoying the fullness of [her] sexuality and the completeness of life" (El Saadawi, 1980, 9).

Due to its profound physical and psychological impact on women's lives, El Saadawi reverted to the circumcision experience in many of her fictional and non-fictional works, especially in her well known novel *Woman at Point Zero*. Like El Saadawi, her protagonist, Firdaus, underwent circumcision at a very young age. For Firdaus, not only was the physical sensation lost as a result of genital mutilation, but her psychic bond with her mother was also broken. The active participation of her mother in the circumcision

changed the way Firdaus saw her, and the mother-daughter relationship was thus marred for good.

Firdaus relates the experience of her circumcision to the psychiatrist, who also happens to be the narrator of the novel. She recounts how her mother beat her first as she was irritated by her inquiries, and then “brought a woman who was carrying a small knife or maybe a razor blade. They cut off a piece of flesh from between [her] thighs” (El Saadawi, 2007, 12). Due to the acute pain that the circumcision caused, Firdaus kept crying all night long. Throughout the novel, Firdaus makes many references to the “remote pleasure, buried in such faraway depths that it seemed to have arisen a very long time ago, longer than the length of memory, older than the remembered years of life’s journey” (El Saadawi, 2007, 33). This obviously refers to the sexual pleasure that she for ever lost as a result of circumcision.

In 1942, Nawal El Saadawi obtained a primary school certificate with excellent grades. However, none of her family was delighted with her success because she was not a male. What mainly vexed El Saadawi was the religiously based duplicity and sex-discrimination with which her family treated her (El Saadawi, 2009, 155). With such gender distinctions, El Saadawi realized that achieving high grades or any other achievement was of no use for females, and that they accordingly had to find a more effective way to prove themselves with.

The bewildering question, El Saadawi frequently asked, was “why was [her brother] treated better than [she] was in all matters?” (El Saadawi, 1980, 9). Her brother enjoyed complete freedom, while she was confined to the home to do the cooking and cleaning, only because she was a girl. Differentiation between male and female was very common in all Muslim families regardless of their class or level of education. Although her parents, as educated people, tried to eliminate any kind of sex discrimination and prevented their son from imposing on his sisters, El Saadawi used to feel that this was not the case in practice. Her brother was granted privileges by birth under the pretext that no one dared to oppose or question God’s laws. Her brother used to beat her, seize her toys and tear up her dolls (El Saadawi, 2006, 36), and she used to violently rebel whenever such

attacks took place (El Saadawi, 1980, 10). Since her early years, El Saadawi did not believe in granting men a higher status or considering them superior to women. She tried her best to refute such beliefs, which were falsely attributed to Islam.

Not only was El Saadawi physically hurt, but she was also mentally affected by her brother's domination. This unjust treatment firmly implanted the idea of sex discrimination in her mind. She repeatedly asked her parents why her brother enjoyed such superiority despite the fact that she was doing better than him at school. Unfortunately, her parents were not able to provide a reasonable answer to her question. The only answer she received was "It is so", to which she would retort, "Why should it be so?" Yet, again the answer remained the same, "Because it is so" (El Saadawi & Wilmuth, 1995, 436). El Saadawi affirms that when she was in an obstinate mood, she would repeat the question again and again, and when her parents grew impatient, they would say "He is a boy, and you are a girl". They would finally invoke religious reasons: "God said it should be so" (El Sadaawi, 1980, 10).

El Saadawi challenged her brother's attempts to dominate her when she was a young girl, and later on her husbands' control over her. She had three failed marriages. The first husband was her classmate Ahmed Helmi, a physician and national activist who sturdily stood against the British colonizers. She bore him a daughter, Mona Helmy who, like her mother, is a writer, poet, and activist (El Saadawi, 2016, 154). El Saadawi divorced Helmi in 1956, because she realized that he was trying to dominate her (El Saadawi, 2000, 12; Newson-Horst, 2010, ix). Her second husband was an Egyptian millionaire who used his masculine power to prevent El Saadawi from writing. He used to tear up her papers and throw them out of the window (El Saadawi, 2006b, 77). However, she refused to give up and insisted on writing, as this meant everything for her. She finally petitioned for separation to gain her freedom. El Saadawi was greatly inspired by the words her father reiterated: "If the price of freedom is expensive, the price of slavery is even more costly" (El Saadawi, 2006b, 81-82).

El Saadawi put women's enslavement at the center of her works, in particular in the novel under analysis. Through the figure of her protagonist, El Saadawi manifested her

dissatisfaction with the way women were treated as inferior to men and the constant attempts to underestimate their enormous potential. Her protagonist, Firdaus, is treated brutally by all the men she meets. In addition to the abuse she suffered at the hands of her father, uncle, husband, lover, boss, colleague and strangers, she was exploited by the police, who represent the authority that was supposed to give her protection. Throughout *Woman at Point Zero*, the reader finds no difficulty in sensing the ill-treatment females systematically received at the hands of men.

In 1946, El Saadawi married Sherif Hetata, who was imprisoned for thirteen years due to his political activism. Hetata, a medical doctor, writer and translator of many of her well-known works into English, became her lifelong husband and companion until 2010. However, they finally divorced for undeclared reasons. She bore him a son, Atef Hetata, a film director whose interest has been tackling social problems (El Saadawi, 2016, 154). For El Saadawi, being divorced in a society like that of Egypt, which smears a divorced woman with shame for the rest of her life, is lot better than marriage enslavement. She looked at divorce quite differently; for her, it meant freedom and emancipation from husbands that oppress and enslave their wives (El Saadawi, 2006b, 81).

Although the religiously enforced traditions and conventions exasperated El Saadawi, they were nonetheless the main motives that prompted her to seek radical social changes. She dedicated herself to educate people, both males and females, especially about certain sensitive issues, such as female circumcision, incest, and sexuality. Although El Saadawi's feminist journey was stuffed with discouragement, disappointment and opposition, she proceeded to speak, write and propagate her ideas in favour of the cause of women all over the world. In Spath's (2005) words:

> Nawal EI Saadawi's voice in the struggle for women's rights in the Middle East is clear and unwavering. For over twenty-five years, EI Saadawi has been a constant force in this vast arena of inequality, bringing light to taboo issues such as the act of clitoridectomy [FGM] and encouraging women to get out of the house, become independent beings, and fight for fairer living conditions. (3)

3.2. El Saadawi's Political Activism

In her work *The Hidden Face of Eve,* El Saadawi maintained that religion cannot be separated from the political system, nor can sex be kept apart from politics. She endeavoured to demonstrate that religion is usually employed as the most effective instrument to keep women completely subjugated. She writes:

> Religion, in particular, is a weapon often used in traditionalist societies to cut short, and even cut down, the efforts of researchers, and seekers after truth. I have come to see more and more clearly that religion is most often used in our day as an instrument in the hands of economic and political forces, as an institution utilized by those who rule to keep down those who are ruled. In this it serves the same purpose as juridical, educational, police and even psychiatric systems used to perpetuate the patriarchal family, historically born, reinforced, and maintained by the oppression of women, children and slaves. (El Saadawi, 1980, 3-4)

From her early age, El Saadawi found freedom in going out, especially when she went to school. She used to ask questions, discuss various matters, listen to people and try to help the poor as much as she could. The plight of women and their struggle, particularly against the constraints that the patriarchal social system imposed on them in the name of Islam, represented the spark for El Saadawi's revolution. She set women's emancipation as her ultimate goal. As some kind of chastisement for her feminist endeavours, many Arab critics dubbed Nawal El Saadawi "Simone De Beauvoir of the Arab World" (al-Wassil, 2009, 9). She was labeled with such epithet due to her controversial ideas which, according to traditionalist Islamists, violated Islamic teachings. Gohar (2016) remarks that El Saadawi developed a theory of "feminist politics in the context of Arab-Islamic history from ancient times up to the present interrogating patriarchal ideologies and anti-feminist hegemony" (174). This misogynistic hegemony was triggered by Islamists and further reinforced in literature by Muslim male writers such as Naguib Mahfouz and Tayyeb Saleh, among others.

El Saadawi was severely critical of the superiority bestowed on men over women. This superiority was forcibly institutionalized in Islam by patriarchal powers. She was the

first Muslim feminist to openly address sexual matters, such as sexual diseases, female circumcision, incest, prostitution and various forms of sexual exploitation (Badran & Cooke, 2004, 203). El Saadawi argued that women in Muslim eastern communities are oppressed by the patriarchal family, husband and official authorities. She added that the oppression experienced by females is economic, psychological, social and sexual, while males' oppression is only a socio-economic one (El Saadawi, 2006a, 67-73).

One of the contradictory assumptions forwarded by the patriarchal system, which El Saadawi firmly stood against, is its duplicity when dealing with women's bodies. El Saadawi debated that the commercial value of a female body contradicts its moral and religious values. For instance, a female body is disrobed in advertisements and commercial promotions; however, it should be veiled according to religious and moral conventions (El Saadawi, 2006b, 30). The other contradictory moral and religious aspect, which the patriarchal reading of the Qur'an justifies, is honour and women's chastity. El Saadawi pointed out that dishonorable deeds, such as adultery, can be carried out by both men and women, and added that the Qur'an explicitly contemplates punishment for fornication, and that this is equally meted out to both the adulteress and adulterer. To quote from the Qur'an:

> The adulteress and the adulterer (or the fornicatress and the fornicator) flog each one of them with a hundred stripes. And let not pity for the twain take hold of you in *executing* the judgment of Allah, if you believe in Allah and the Last Day. And let a party of the believers witness their punishment. (Qur'an 24.3; emphasis in original)

In practice, though, this punishment, when inflicted, is only suffered by women. Sometimes men are even proud of their illegal, immoral and irreligious sexual relationships in an attempt to show off their masculinity (El Saadawi, 1990, 39-41). What is even worse, women are always incriminated, even when they have been raped: "according to misreadings of the Word, they were required to have four male witnesses" to prove their innocence (Barlas, 2019, 7). If women were not able to prove the rape, they were sentenced for adultery, which completely wipes out family honour. In most Muslim societies, the

honour of men and the whole family rests on women's sexual purity, and this is why it is allocated such great importance (Sha'rāwī, 1987, 8).

In *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus was raped, even gang raped by Bayoumi and his friends when she was imprisoned in Bayoumi's flat, but she decided not to report the attack or seek help from the authority. She was aware that, according to the traditions of her society, the authorities would not do justice to her. She was sure that, as a woman, she would not be able to prove her innocence. Actually, when a neighbour suggested calling the police in an attempt to set Firdaus free from Bayoumi's prison, Firdaus did not agree, and stated instead: "the word police frightened me", a phrase which indicates that she did by no means believe that the authorities would offer her any kind of protection (El Saadawi, 2007, 54).

Since her early childhood, El Saadawi was aware of the social responsibilities exclusively imposed on women as the "carriers of the family honour", which is the honor of society as a whole (Abouzeid, 2016, 538). In order to preserve sexual purity, not only circumcision, but also the veil and women's seclusion were imposed. In the early twentieth century, not only Muslim, but also Christian and Jewish Egyptian women were veiled. Lucie Duff Gordon, a perspicacious Englishwoman who lived in Egypt in the late nineteenth century, maintained what, in Upper Egypt (where traditions and conventions are strictly followed), Christian women were even "more fastidious than the Muslims in veiling" (as cited in Sha'rāwī, 1987, 8-10). Thus, veiling and the harem system, in Sha'rāwī's words, were "social conventions connected with economic standing. They had nothing whatsoever to do with Islam. Even those in Egypt who knew better were usually loathe to admit it publicly" (8).

El Saadawi questioned purity and religious principles in a very straight and bold way, disregarding the danger she put herself in. She pointed out that ethics and chastity should be followed by all people, regardless of their sex, colour, religion or social class. She also argued that, when chastity is expected from one race or class while other races and classes are exempted, this only indicates that chastity is a political measure imposed

by the patriarchal system, rather than a moral precept sanctioned by the Holy Scripture, as patriarchy perpetually claims (El Saadawi, 1990a, 39).

Patriarchal social conventions, such as virginity, honour, circumcision, degradation and subjugation by both family and husband, are all inflicted against women in order to render them inferior. Such unreasonable way of treating women urged El Saadawi to expose such issues in almost all of her works with a view to uncovering the hypocrisy and duplicity of patriarchy. El Saadawi believed that all societies were in need of authentic facts about women to replace the false concepts traditionally attributed to them in the name of religion. She remarked that her trips to many countries, her acquaintance with developed, underdeveloped, capitalist and socialist societies, together with her extensive reading of history and literature interacted with her own experience as a woman to contribute deeper insights about women's oppression and the appropriate way in which it should be confronted (El Saadawi, 1990b, 9).

El Saadawi's experiences in domestic and professional life, in which she was pretty close to the troubled and oppressed, had a persistent effect on her mind. Consequently, she successfully interpreted the difficulties of such people in her literary works. Her practice as a medical doctor, as well as the period she spent in her exile in the West, "anchor[ed] her views in a humanism that pierces the veneer of exploitative practices in several cultures" (Royer, 2001, iv). From 1963 till 1972, El Saadawi occupied the post of General Director for Public Health Education. In addition to her position as a governmental executive, she was appointed chief editor for Health Magazine in Cairo, which would eventually be closed down on account of its subversive contents (El Saadawi, 2016, 155).

It was during this time (1965-66) that she went to America to pursue her postgraduate studies in public health at Columbia University in New York (El Saadawi, 2016, 155). Like Iqbalunnisa Hussain, that period doubtlessly offered El Saadawi the opportunity to see and experience western women's freedom firsthand. In her non-fiction work *Al-mara' Wa al-Jins* (1969) (Women and Sex), she denounced the religiously justified crimes committed against women's bodies, such as circumcision and defloration. Owing to her frank writings on sexuality and her controversial feminist ideas, El Saadawi

was dismissed from her position as General Director for Public Health Education (Malti-Douglas, 1995, 7). Jobless, she resorted to writing as the only medium through which she could articulate her resentment and denounce the patriarchal system and its oppressive practices against women.

While conducting some research on neurotic women in Qanatir Prison in Egypt, where she worked as a psychiatrist, El Saadawi met Firdaus only one night before her execution. Firdaus would later become the heroine of her novel *Woman at Point Zero* (Cooke, 2007, vii). The publication of this novel reinforced the campaign of censure against her even further (Selim, 2004, 237). El Saadawi's contentious presentation of such matters engendered so much controversy that she lost her job. Then she had to go to Lebanon to both save her life from Islamist fanatics and reprint her book, which became widely read throughout the Arab Muslim world. El Saadawi was the first Arab and Muslim woman to discuss women's sexuality, a question that had been intentionally avoided by most writers of both sexes (Accad, 1987, 42). She was extraordinarily courageous to frankly and scientifically deal with customs and taboos, such as "honour and virginity, work and education for women, marriage, polygyny, divorce, and finally the importance of sex and women's right to orgasm as well as the very touchy subject of genital mutilation" (Accad, 1987, 42). Such issues were enshrouded in a misleading religious cover that blocked the way for any endeavour to search for their truth and authenticity.

As El Saadawi was considered to be a leading figure of Islamic feminists, whose secular ideas, as was argued before, are similar to those of western feminists, her opponents portrayed her as if she were the ultimate embodiment of the western values that tried to destroy Muslim civilization. On the other hand, delving in such sensitive topics in a conservative Muslim society like that of Egypt gave El Saadawi's writings the power to shock, move and inspire, and this in spite of becoming the target of her detractors. Malti-Douglas (1995) noted that "no Arab woman's pen has violated as many sacred enclosures as that of Nawal El Saadawi"(3). Malti-Douglas went on to say, "Is it any wonder that many an Arab male intellectual has dismissed her in my presence as at best an opportunist and at worst a whore?" (1995, 3). Due to her bold and newfangled writings, El Saadawi

envisioned herself as if she were living behind invisible walls and exiled within her own country. Nonetheless, she did not surrender.

She often confirmed that no authority in the world had the ability to wrest the pen from her hand. She also stated that she would continue putting her thoughts on paper despite the fact that patriarchal institutions had absolute control over all the channels that might reach the general public. El Saadawi's uncompromising views sent her to prison in 1981; she criticized the Egyptian president Anwar El Sadat (El Saadawi, 2000, 12; Malti-Douglas, 1995, 7). In fact, her imprisonment offered her firsthand experience of women's resistance to the violence practised by the authority, and fascinating insights into the formation of a female community at the same time.

Malti-Douglas (1995) states that El Saadawi was usually accused of ruining, not just the daughters of the Nile, but also those of the entire Middle Eastern Muslim world (3). Sherif Hetata (1992), her husband, also stated that the media was against her because she did not abandon what she believed in, and did not comply with the authority (9). Because of her steadfast positions, many accusations were imputed to her, such as inducing to debauchery and moral corruption, opposing Islam and its rules and writing for the West, and thus against Egypt and Arab Muslim countries. Among other indictments, she was accused of encouraging women in Holland to divorce their husbands (Hetata, 1992, 9). Besides, Saiti and Salti (1994) stated that, since the publication of her first semi-fictional work *Muthekkarat Tabibah* (1958; translated into English as *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, 2013) up to the present day, El Saadawi has been under attack by everyone, "from local politicians and religious figures to readers and literary critics", because no female oppressor was exempted from her censure (153).

El Saadawi argued that female oppression is practiced on multiple levels. Women "want liberation from national oppression, from colonial or international exploitation, from legal oppression, from sexual oppression and from family oppression" (El Saadawi & Beall, 1989, 34). El Saadawi's political attitudes, in particular, together with the sensitive issues she frequently addressed, rendered her one of the most defiant Muslim writers. However, critics, both eastern and western, have not paid much attention to such a widely

read author, whose works, taught in many universities around the world, have been translated into more than forty languages (Amin, 2016, 158).

Eastern critics, Muslim in particular, avoided writing about her because her thoughts were regarded as a gross violation of Islam and its values. In so doing, they spare themselves the same accusations that El Saadawi received. Simultaneously, she was severely critical of western feminism and capitalism which, according to her, constantly try to dominate the whole world. In this respect, the sparseness of literary criticism on El Saadawi's works in the West can be regarded as an embodiment of the Eurocentric perspective adopted by most western authors. What has so far been written on El Saadawi's oeuvre is, generally speaking, nothing but scathing attacks (Malti-Douglas, 1991, 111-13; Saiti & Salti, 1994, 172; Smith, 2007, 59). In consequence, this study aims to make up for this lack by analyzing both *Woman at Point Zero* and the socio-political and theoretical backgrounds that prompted its writing.

It is undeniable that the political activism of El Saadawi's father, together with his biting censure of corruption, autocracy and the oppression of the colonizer and its sycophants had massive influence on El Saadawi's political positions (BahadlKhafaja, 2017, 45). Her father belonged to the generation of the 1919 Revolution, which advocated the importance of education for Arab people in general and females in particular. It also focused on disregarding the unreasonable non-Islamic conventions that distrust women's mental abilities and consider them to be unable to reason and learn (El Saadawi, 2006b, 59; 2009). El Saadawi's father was widely known for his opposition to the ruling class and his support of the poor, who were suffering from ignorance and diseases. He believed that the optimum solution was to change the current regime through a revolution which should be led by the oppressed themselves (El Saadawi, 2006b, 268-269).

Like Iqbalunnisa Hussain, El Saadawi herself witnessed the impact of poverty during the years of British colonial rule. She lived among the poor of her village and observed their misery firsthand. In her description of the situation of local children, El Saadawi wrote:

> In [the villages] of Menouf and Kafr Tahla, I often saw children who were blind, or with one eye open and the other closed, or with a white spot creeping over the black pupil, or with swollen eyelids exuding pus and with flies all over their faces. (as cited in Aptheker, 2009, x)

In 1951, when El Saadawi was a medical student in Cairo University, she took part in the patriotic demonstrations organized by students against British occupation. She described her feelings during these enthusiastic moments as follows: “I am walking among them without body, name, father, mother and family, they are my family, my parents and my home” (El Saadawi, 2006b, 299). El Saadawi once said, “Fighting for more justice, more freedom, and more love, that is my identity” (as cited in Royer, 2001, i). Despite the fact that women were expressly prevented from taking part in any social protests or political activities at that time, El Saadawi and some of her classmates broke the heavy metal door which was shut to prevent female students from joining the demonstrations. She related that, during this transcendent moment, an anti-colonial consciousness blended with a nascent feminist one:

> The hundreds of [women’s] arms became a single powerful arm that twisted the metal, snapped it with the strength of anger building up since the day they were born, with the force of a dream suppressed in childhood, with the power of a great love imprisoned in the chest, with all the pent-up hatred against doors, and chains, and locks, with all the hope of a coming freedom. (El Saadawi, 2009, 287)

In her *Muthekarati Fi Sijin al-Nisaa* (2000) (Memoirs from the Women’s Prison), El Saadawi commented that her unforgivable crime was being a free woman at a time that only had room for slaves; she had the ability to think while the authorities tried to invalidate any role that intellectuals tried to play in society (11). She saw her mother rebelling against the military, and against the traditionally and religiously granted authority of her father and husband when they shouted at her. She also saw her father rebelling angrily against the local authorities and the British (BahadlKhafaja, 2017, 42). She heard her paternal grandmother singing against oppression, poverty and the gloomy years (El Saadawi, 2000,

11). El Saadawi bravely rejected male domination and refused to conform to patriarchal rules, so strictly observed in her society.

When her older brother tried to slap her, she lifted her hand higher and slapped him. When her first husband tried to subjugate her, she divorced him. And when the Health Minister asked her to choose between obedience and dismissal, she said "dismissal" and lost her position to gain her freedom (El Saadawi, 2000, 12). Furthermore, El Saadawi's struggle was not only confined to the national level, but she also criticized the exploitative global trend of consumerism and the modern capitalist world (Ladele, 2016, 136-37). In her speech against globalization, El Saadawi stated that, if globalization meant spreading the western ideas, values and culture only, she would stand against it and regard it as domination: "the powerful dominate the weak, and they call that globalization" (as cited in Royer, 2001, iv).

El Saadawi appealed for a global resistance in which all efforts could come together to come up with an effective power that could enforce real change. She denounced that in the three major monotheistic religions, i.e. Judaism, Christianity and Islam, "women are looked upon as inferior to men" (El Saadawi, 2006b, 14). She also thought that women, both in the West and the East, were, and still are, far from having achieved their personal and political rights, because women's liberation was almost impossible in a capitalist patriarchal society. Thus, women, in almost all religious patriarchal societies, were fighting to regain their rights and raising a global feminist consciousness, which was of considerable significance for the women's cause in general.

According to El Saadawi, for feminist activism to become more effective, it should be a collaborative effort. She declared that "to be dissident means to struggle, to liberate oneself and others in one's family, in one's community, locally and globally. In this sense, we cannot separate the global from the local level, so we call our struggle 'glocal'" (El Saadawi, 2006c, 116). In the foreword to *A Daughter of Isis*, El Saadawi's autobiography, Bettina Aptheker (2009) maintained that she "embodies the international struggle for women's liberation" (ix). In 1988, El Saadawi's name appeared on the death list of the Islamic Fundamentalists on account of her bold propounding of crucial socio-political

issues that countered the traditional interpretation of the Qur'anic texts. Consequently, she was forced to flee Egypt.

El Saadawi moved to America, where she taught at Duke University and the University of Washington in Seattle (El Saadawi, 2016, 156). She returned to Egypt in 1996. As an attempt to stir stagnant waters, break with restrictions and urge for political reformations, she stood as a candidate in the 2005 presidential election in Egypt (El Saadawi, 2016, 157). Although she was forced to withdraw her candidacy, her attempt resulted in amending the 76th article of the electoral legislation, which opens the door for more than one candidate to compete for the president position (Khalil, 2005, par. 7).

El Saadawi also reached the conclusion that her medical profession was unable to remedy people's major sufferings. She then argued that sickness and poverty were mainly related to "politics, to money and power", and that the medical practice could do very little to alleviate that (El Saadawi, 2009, 352). Moreover, she frequently stated that she had nothing left to fight with but her pen. She thought that with her writings she could defend herself, her freedom and humanity's freedom all over the world. She also considered her pen to be the only medium whereby she could express and denounce the misery of the poor, women and slaves (El Saadawi, 2000, 12). As she put it herself:

> Writing became a weapon with which to fight the system, which draws its authority from the autocratic power exercised by the ruler of the state, and that of the father or the husband in the family. The written word for [me] became an act of rebellion against injustice exercised in the name of religion, or morals, or love. (El Saadawi, 2009, 352)

3.3. El Saadawi's Style and the Derisive Reception of *Woman at Point Zero*

When reading a novel penned by El Saadawi, the reader will not fail to sense the plight the author underwent as she wrote. The passion and depth of the novelist's reaction towards her own life stocked all the essential ingredients of her dramatic fiction. However, the power of El Saadawi's novel to fascinate has not only been attributed to the effectiveness of the incidents that shaped her writing, but also to the impassioned way in which she demanded social justice and defied categorization. Despite the fact that feminism

was nascent at the time she began to write, El Saadawi strongly responded to this movement or, to be more precise, led it in her own society with the help of her theoretical and fictional writings.

El Saadawi had a prodigious inclination for education from her early childhood, a time when females were denied this right (El Saadawi, 1980, 12). She studied medicine, philosophy, psychology, sociology and history (El Saadawi, 2000, 11; El Saadawi & Wilmuth, 1995, 437). Delving into history, in particular, offered El Saadawi vast knowledge about women's high position in ancient societies and the rights they once enjoyed. Her awareness of such historical facts, together with her acquaintance with other sciences, consolidated her social and political activism to restore women's extorted rights.

Living among oppressed people gave El Saadawi an accurate image of the reality of her society, which she desperately wanted to improve. The aims she set for herself kept her intimately attached to ordinary people. The circumstances under which this author lived with her family gave her firsthand experience of several feminist matters about which she would later on write. Such issues included sex discrimination, disrespect for females within both the micro (family) and the macro society, lack of women's rational education, and dearth of decent jobs and marriage, the main trap for women, as she put it.

Due to her daring critical method and the controversial ideas she propounded, especially in her criticism of Islamic rules and traditions falsely attributed to Islam, El Saadawi was fiercely chastised. In addition, most of her works were banned in an attempt by the authorities to prevent her works from having any effect on society members, particularly women. However, she remained steadfast in her struggle against patriarchy and its oppressive institutions. Her nonconformity pushed her to lead a tormenting life in a masculine society that carefully observed traditions and conventions. She combined her proficiency in writing with her awareness of gender-based oppression to introduce subversive texts that have the potential to improve the female condition. All the contextual factors that El Saadawi witnessed are sharply embodied by the female characters that she delineated, in particular in the novel under discussion.

What El Saadawi experienced in her own life can be visibly seen in the behavior of her heroine, Firdaus, particularly in her rejection of what patriarchal traditions obliged her to do in the name of Islam. On the other hand, images of subjugation can also be seen throughout the novel through the other female characters she carefully delineated. Moreover, *Woman at Point Zero* provided a powerful synthesis of the themes contained in the most influential feminist non-fictional book *Al-Wajh al-'Ari lil-Mar'a al-'Arabiyya* (The Hidden Face of Eve) written by El Saadawi (Daniel, 2014, 124; Murray, 1984, 87).

This novel faced heated rejection, not just because it was penned by a female author, but mainly because of the controversial ideas it upheld. Besides her explicit comments on sex education, El Saadawi challenged the dogma that loving the husband is a wife's duty. In this respect, *Woman at Point Zero* was looked at as an invitation, encouragement and justification for prostitution and immorality. Such a novel, according to many, could only contribute to degenerating Muslim society.

An overwhelming number of Arab critics, writers and clerics attacked El Saadawi. She was run down for both her writing style and thoughts which, according to them, resemble that of the western feminists to some degree, (Saiti & Salti, 1994, 172). In *Tah't Shamss al Fikr* (Under the Sun of the Intellect), Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm (1982) maintained that women are the blooming and fragrant flowers in the garden of human life; yet, they also have thorns (233). He attempted to spread the idea that women's positive attributes are their obligation to gratify man's sexual desires and conduct domestic chores, while the negative ones are, on the contrary, disconformity and rejection of man's authority.

When analyzing *Women at Point Zero,* Tarabishi (2013) despised what is positive and concentrated on the negative aspects. He argued that El Saadawi's endeavour to bind herself to Firdaus is not to add more credibility to her novel. It rather shows the author's own yearning to associate with a criminal prostitute (Tarabishi, 2013, 267-70). In clear opposition to this, the narrator of the story comments on the way she views herself and her heroine as follows:

> As a matter of fact, my whole life seemed to be threatened with failure. My self-confidence began to be badly shaken, and I went through difficult moments. It

> looked to me as though this woman who had killed a human being, and was shortly to be killed herself, was a much better person than I. Compared to her, I was nothing but a small insect crawling upon the land amidst millions of other insects. (El Saadawi, 2007, 4)

Despite the aforementioned limitations and the fierce censure received, it seems that El Saadawi's novel shook the religious, social and political spheres in the Muslim world. Not only was her life distinctive, but she also had a distinguished creative genius when propagating Islamic feminism. In *Woman at Point Zero*, El Saadawi conveyed theories of Islamic feminist politics, which she had previously developed in other works of hers. She interrogated the "anti-feminist hegemony", which was empowered by religion and reinforced by male writers. She thus countered the views of some of the most influential contemporary male authors, such as Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm, Naguib Mahfouz and Tayyeb Saleh (Gohar, 2016, 174-175).

El Saadawi presented herself as an impartial rationalist eligible to compete with men for recognition as regards literary genius (Rich, 1986, 88). Keeping in mind that Islamic feminism is mainly concerned with reflecting women's real conditions in Muslim patriarchal societies, El Saadawi's novel mirrored the situation in which women were thought of as the objects of men's desires (El Saadawi, 1980, 88). The author put to the fore the idealized construction of patriarchal values as she saw it. To put it differently, her writing allowed patriarchal societies to observe how dark the real male image might be when portrayed in women's writings.

Apparently, El Saadawi's distinctive style of fiction is replete with gloomy self-expression. She adopted such a style of writing as a weapon whereby she could confront patriarchy. One of the taboo topics that El Saadawi introduced in this novel is the idea of homosexuality, as the protagonist clearly experiences a homosexual attraction towards her teacher, Miss Iqpal:

> I […] took her hand in mine. The feeling of our hands touching was strange, sudden. It was a feeling that made my body tremble with a deep distant pleasure, more distant than the age of my remembered life, deeper than the consciousness I had

> carried with me throughout. I could feel it somewhere, like a part of my being which had been born with me when I was born, but had not grown with me when I had grown, like a part of my being that I had once known, but left behind when I was born. A cloudy awareness of something that could have been, and yet was never lived. At that moment a memory came to my mind. My lips opened to speak, but my voice failed to come through, as though no sooner did I remember than I had already forgotten. My heart faltered, stifled by a frightened, frenzied beating over something precious I was on the point of losing, or had just lost, forever. My fingers held on to her hand with such violence that no force on earth, no matter how great, could tear it away from me. (El Saadawi, 2007, 31-32)

In *Woman at Point Zero*, El Saadawi presented a feminist model that transcends the barriers of Islamic feminism. She believed that, in order to achieve the desired goals of feminist undertakings, women's efforts should gather to question, not only religion, but also race, sex, and class considerations. El Saadawi endeavoured to develop a natural bond between women through the shared experience of gendered oppression as imposed by patriarchal social institutions and experienced by women (Daniel, 2014, 123).

The style through which El Saadawi introduced her new radical concept of "female solidarity" was severely censured and seen as the mere self-expression of an emotionally damaged writer (Bishara, 2013, 76). However, the discourse she offered in her text marked the beginning of an unfamiliar and nuanced style of fiction which would give a voice to the previously silenced women (Gohar, 2016, 174; Malti-Douglas, 1995, 57). This tactic was used by El Saadawi as a new trend in literature that enhanced female bonding and its power to challenge patriarchal institutions, which assert women's inacapibility to cope with life without men. In this way, El Saadawi attempted to refute the dominant patriarchal misogynist overview, allegedly based on the Qur'an and other religious texts.

The communion developed between the narrator, an upper-class female physician, and Firdaus, a criminal whom the society despised, became an articulate exemplar of the solidarity El Saadawi yearned for. Throughout her life, Firdaus had been unable to establish any hetero-social relationship since such relationships, according to El Saadawi, basically

relied on exploitative elements (El Saadawi, 1980, xiii). By contrast, Firdaus could have good homo-social relationships with some female characters she encountered. As a prisoner, Firdaus is supported by the prison female guard, who on the other hand represents the authority and laws which Firdaus violated. Hence, enhancing same-sex relationships and depicting male-female ones in such disastrous ways aimed at "gendering the question of sensibility's potential for social justice" (Craciun & Lokke, 2001, 237). In essence, women can only be emancipated when they obtain effective political power or when they achieve a sense of solidarity among their own sex (Culley, 2014, 53; El Saadawi, 1980, xv; Poovey, 1998, 409).

3.3.1. The Circular Structure of *Woman at Point Zero*

Woman at Point Zero is divided into three parts, all of which are related in the first person narrative mode. The beginning and closing parts are reported by a psychiatrist visiting the protagonist in her prison, who can be clearly regarded as the author's alter ego. On the other hand, the bulk of the novel is recounted by Firdaus, the novel's protagonist. In the psychiatrist's prologue and epilogue, which are almost identical, we can see how the author becomes enmeshed in the world of the heroine in such a way that it makes it even harder to distinguish who speaks, as the voices of El Saadawi and Firdaus constantly "echo each other" (Lionnet, 1995, 144). Bearing in mind El Saadawi's struggle against patriarchal institutions and her scathing censure of religious hypocrisy, which led to her losing of all the governmental and non-governmental positions she occupied, it seems that both the author and her heroine share a similar saga which leads them to adopt the same fashion in their narratives. In other words, it is not easy to differentiate between both because their narratives emanate from similar female oppressed situations.

When the psychiatrist entered Firdaus's cell, it was Firdaus who ordered the psychiatrist to "close the window", "sit down on the ground" and not to interrupt her (El Saadawi, 2007, 7). The first and the last parts of the novel, written with similar and sometimes identical words, describe the author's "oceanic state" (Lionnet, 1995, 144).

> It was the cold of the sea in a dream. I swam through its waters. I was naked and knew not how to swim. But I neither felt its cold, nor drowned in its waters. Her voice too was like the voices one hears in a dream. It was close to me, yet seemed

> to come from afar, spoke from a distance and seemed to arise from nearby. For we do not know from where these voices arise: from above or below, to our left or our right. We might even think they come from the depths of the earth, drop from the rooftops, or fall from the heavens. Or they might even flow from all directions, like air moving in space reaches the ears. But this was no dream. This was not air flowing into my ears. The woman sitting on the ground in front of me was a real woman, and the voice filling my ears with its sound, echoing in a cell where the window and door were tightly shut, could only be her voice, the voice of Firdaus. (El Saadawi, 2007, 7-8)

According to Lionnet, El Saadawi's book opens and closes by "blurring the distinctions between 'subject' and 'object', psychiatrist and case study, author and prisoner, biography and autobiography, fiction and documentary" (1995, 145). This kind of narrative is commonly employed in the genre labeled as 'feminine confession', which "reflects the difficulties many women experience in defining an independent identity, and their overwhelming yearning for intimacy" (Felski, 1989, 108-109). It is also possible that El Saadawi adopted this technique in order to communicate the idea that women who live under the same cultural circumstances share identical experiences, regardless of their social affiliation. Hence, in *Woman at Point Zero* ,"The psychiatrist and the prostitute are a powerful couple, divided by class but united by gender" (Malti-Douglas, 1995, 37).

Thanks to repetition "events merge one with another, creat[ing] a sense of quasi-synchronicity" (Malti-Douglas, 1995, 40). Such a construction creates a circular framing, quite common in El Saadawi's works. According to Malti-Douglas, the identification between the prologue and the epilogue in this novel "closes the textual circle" (Malti-Douglas, 1995, 37). At the very end of the novel, the police enter the cell and encircle Firdaus to take her to the execution ground: "they surrounded her in a circle" (El Saadawi, 2007, 114). This physical circle further accentuates the impression of no way out and circularity in Firdaus's sorry story. Firdaus "leaves it as she entered it" (Malti-Douglas, 1995, 37).

As can be read in the epilogue, “Firdaus’ voice suddenly fell silent” (El Saadawi, 2007, 113). She was taken away by the police, “I saw her walk out with them. I never saw her again”, the psychiatrist said (El Saadawi, 2007, 114). The disappearance of the protagonist’s voice and the return of the author’s do not only end up Firdaus’s story, but they also bring the story back to the same point at which it started. Such an open-ended narrative consequently endows the story with a catch-22 flavour, a cyclical rather than linear flow of narration. Ending it this way also invites the reader to ponder his/her own experience with regard to the story. Upon reading such a story the reader is “left with the realization that there are parts of the novel to which s/he does not have access”, and there must be “things that were not represented at all—parts of Firdaus’s and the narrator’s subjectivities that are not accessible, not universal, and that are, in the end, indeterminable” (Weatherston, 1997, n. p.).

In both the prologue and the epilogue the psychiatrist declared that Firdaus was better than herself, because Firdaus preferred freedom to slavery; she refused to sign the appeal which the medical doctor wrote for her. From the very start, the psychiatrist shows her admiration towards Firdaus, whose resolution makes her feel inferior. “Compared to her, I was nothing” (El Saadawi, 2007, 4). In the last lines of the novel, El Saadawi restates her admiration towards Firdaus’s determination and courage: “Inside of me was a feeling of shame. I felt ashamed of myself, of my life, of my fears, and my lies. […] I realized that Firdaus had more courage than I” (El Saadawi, 2007, 114).

Firdaus realized that there was no room for free women in such a hypocritical society, and that signing a petition would only serve to entrap her again. For her, captivity was to live under someone else’s power, tolerate the deception of those in power, or be unable to make decisions/choices for oneself. When Bayoumi asked Firdaus whether she preferred oranges or tangerines, his question startled her because she had never been asked to make a choice before, “I tried to reply but my voice failed me. No one had asked me before whether I preferred oranges or tangerines. My father never bought us fruit. My uncle and my husband used to buy it without asking me what I preferred” (El Saadawi, 2007, 50).

Another element El Saadawi uses to emphasize the circularity of the narrative is the repetition of the eyes motif all through the novel, as will soon be explained. "All eyes staring in my direction, countless eyes transformed under my gaze into innumerable rings of white surrounding innumerable circles of black, which turned in a concerted circular movement to fix their look steadily in my eyes", Firdaus says at one point (El Saadawi, 2007, 27). Different narrative elements are therefore used to reinforce the idea of entrapment and the vicious circle around which the protagonist, like many other Muslim women, cannot but keep on rotating.

3.3.2. The Eyes Motif

Eyes, in their different colours and gazes, have been a very complex and multi-layered metaphor widely employed in literature to highlight a number of feelings and ideas. Out of all the other senses, sight is regarded as the closest to our mind and consciousness. It is usually said that the eye is the window of the soul, and that we are our eyes, because eyes instantly show our fears and emotions. Unlike words, one single gaze can send extraordinary expressive messages which can be neither said nor written. Additionally, we do not just see with our eyes; we actually employ our eyes to judge people, communicate our state of mind, expose our real character, and connect with others.

El Saadawi contributed a new understanding of the eyes and the gaze, particularly in her short story "Eyes" (1989), her novel *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* (2013), and more significantly in the novel under analysis. Throughout *Woman at Point Zero,* the motif of the eyes keeps on appearing, turning them into a powerful symbol. Yet, it is worth noting that Firdaus did not describe all the eyes she met with the same extent and detail. For Firdaus, not all eyes were the same. Depending on the kind of people and the nature of the relationship she established with them, she categorized eyes into either caring or abusive.

In the course of the novel, Firdaus attempted several times to express herself in words, but her voice failed to emerge (El Saadawi, 2007, 30, 48, 50, 85, 95). Instead, she communicated with and judged people through the connection she established with them when she observed their eyes. She commented, "I still had two black eyes that looked people straight in the face and were ready to counter the shifty, leering glances thrown at

me as I made my way through life" (El Saadawi, 2007, 79). Firdaus first described her mother's eyes, which were "two rings of intense white around two circles of intense black" (El Saadawi, 2007, 16). This kind of description becomes a recurring image in the novel. It was in those two rings that she found the comfort and emotional support she was yearning for (El Saadawi, 2007, 29).

These eyes watched her, even if she disappeared from their view. Elaborating on her mother's eyes, Firdaus affirms, "They could see me, and follow me wherever I went, so that if I faltered while learning to walk they would hold me up" (El Saadawi, 2007, 15). Encounters with people with eyes similar to her mother's was an indication of love, support and acceptance. Abusive eyes stand for a worse period in Firdaus's miserable life. She was introduced to the world of prostitution by Sharifa Salah el-Dine, a female pimp. Like other ironic names El Saadawi uses in her novel, particularly Firdaus, which means paradise, Sharifa Salah el-Dine stands for a virtuous or an honorable female (Sharifa), together with reform or the betterment of religion (Salah el-Dine).

El Saadawi also employs irony in the description of her eyes. Sharifa's eyes were "shadowed with green make-up", and the "black pupils in the centre of her eyes seemed to have turned green, a powerful dark green" (El Saadawi, 2007, 54). Having in mind that Sharifa is the one who introduced Firdaus to the world of prostitution, her green eyes could be interpreted as giving the green light to Firdaus's entry into the world of debauchery but also a paradoxically new kind of freedom, a world analogous to the green liquid in which she was gradually drowning.

> It was strange, this sensation of drowning in dark green, in a dark green with a density of its own, a consistency of its own, like the feel of water in the sea, a sea in which I was sleeping, and dreaming, in which I was sinking as I slept and dreamt, in which I was gradually sinking without getting wet, gradually dropping without getting drowned. I felt myself lying on its bed at one moment, swallowed deep down inside, and a moment later carried gently upwards, floating higher and higher back to its surface, without moving an arm or a leg. (El Saadawi, 2007, 55)

Additionally, Sharifa's green eyes differed from all the other eyes which Firdaus had previously met. Their different colour indicated the uniqueness of this woman, who rebelled against the hypocrisy of religious and traditional norms in Muslim societies. What further showed the peculiarity of Sharifa was her job as a pimp. She was in control of the prostitutes, who worked for her, just as men did with their wives and sisters. In a word, the manner in which Sharifa exploited women placed her on an equal footing to men.

Some other eyes become the source of threat, fear and loathing. The eyes of those who threatened and scared Firdaus were very different from those of her mother and teacher. These were the patriarchal eyes which haunted Firdaus and penetrated every nook and cranny of her social life. Their gaze objectified her, because she was for them nothing but a sexual object that men had the right to abuse. On the other hand, this same gaze kept Firdaus under close surveillance so as to ensure her strict observation of the moral rules institutionalized by the patriarchal interpretation of Islam. In his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault (1995) claimed that disciplinary power is exercised "through its invisibility; at the same time it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility" (187). As will be explained later, eyes are also considered to be a "brilliant evocation of the psychic trauma that may result from cultural forms of masculine surveillance" (Nnaemeka, 1997, 79).

To guarantee the strict observation of the regulations set by patriarchal powers, surveillance is quite an effective technique to rely on. In Muslim patriarchal societies, the scrupulous observation of norms is demanded on the part of both men and women although, in practice, men's immoral deeds are usually tolerated. When a male pimp threatened her life, Firdaus found out that the police were conniving with him to share the prostitutes' income (El Saadawi, 2007, 101). Moreover, when resorting to legal proceedings for help, Firdaus also discovered that "the law punishes women like [her], but turns a blind eye to what men do" (El Saadawi, 2007, 101).

In *Woman at Point Zero,* El Saadawi effectively uses the eyes motif to symbolize the theme of surveillance. Throughout her life, Firdaus was kept under control, both privately and publicly. As a little girl, student, young woman, wife and even prostitute,

Firdaus was always haunted by the same eyes, which made sure that she conformed to the wishes and demands of patriarchy. “Ever since I was born those two eyes had always been there, wide open, staring, unflinching, following every morsel of food on my plate” (El Saadawi, 2007, 71). In her attempt to escape domestic surveillance, Firdaus went from bad to worse. When she ran away from her uncle’s house in order not to marry Sheikh Mahmoud, Firdaus found nowhere to resort to but the street. Out in the darkness, she stated:

> I suddenly perceived two eyes, or rather felt them, moving towards me very slowly, closer and closer. They dropped their gaze with slow intent down to my shoes, rested there for a moment, then gradually started to climb up my legs, to my thighs, my belly, my breasts, my neck and finally came to a stop, fastening themselves steadily in my eyes, with the same cold intent. A shudder passed through my body, like the fear of death, or like death itself. (El Saadawi, 2007, 43-44)

The terror Firdaus experienced obliged her to go back to her uncle’s house and reluctantly agree to marry Sheikh Mahmoud. However, Sheikh Mahmoud subjugated her to a rather closer and more humiliating surveillance. With the new kind of monitoring imposed by her husband, Firdaus was scrutinized all the time, even when carrying out the most mundane tasks, such as cleaning and cooking: “All day long he remained by my side in the house, or in the kitchen, watching me as I cooked or washed”. Firdaus went on to say, “If I dropped the packet of soap powder and spilled a few grains on the floor, he would jump up from his chair and complain at me for being careless” (El Saadawi, 2007, 46). Sheikh Mahmoud is a man of religion, and therefore keeps a constant eye on his wife to make sure she does not break any of his rules. Surveillance should thus be considered as one of the most effective instruments employed by patriarchy to keep women under perpetual domination.

Patriarchal gaze can also be viewed as a tool in the male-female sexual politics. Women should understand the “social power of the scopic” inherent in patriarchy (Malti-Douglas, 1995, 116). Women should also realize that their ability to act socially is linked to the absence of the patriarchal gaze, much more powerful to restrict women’s freedom than any other tools. This explains why Firdaus unsuccessfully tries to do away with the

feeling of terror she experienced when she confronted patriarchal eyes, “I was not confronted with a hand holding a knife or a razor, but only with two eyes, nothing but two eyes” (El Saadawi, 2007, 44). Patriarchal eyes clearly symbolize the way in which men dominate, or rather, possess women as if they were a commodity. As Firdaus remarked:

> All I know is that anything I would have to face in the world had become less frightening than the vision of those two eyes, which sent a cold shiver running through my spine whenever I remembered them. I had no idea what colour they were, green or black, or something else. Nor could I recall their shape, whether they were large, wide-open eyes, or just two narrow slits. But whenever I walked in the street, whether by day or by night, I would look around me carefully as though I expected the two eyes to rise up suddenly through some opening in the ground and confront me. (El Saadawi, 2007, 44)

3.3.3. Women’s Commodification and Firdaus’s Version of Liberty

The unfair male-female relationships presented in *Woman at Point Zero* demonstrate how men exploit women both economically and sexually. El Saadawi (1980) concluded that, although some women had the opportunity to receive good education, which qualified them to occupy well-paid jobs, they were nonetheless deprived of the possibility to gain their independence. They were kept under the dominance of their husbands, who took away their earnings. They were always threatened with divorce in case they refused to hand out their own properties, attempted to escape male authority, or acted according to their own desires and wills. In all her fictional and theoretical works, El Saadawi stood sturdily in the face of such practices, authorized by the biased reading of the holy text. El Saadawi (1980) remarked, “Patriarchal norms and values continue to reign in the home, the street, the school, the mosque and the place of work […] concepts and attitudes propagated through radio programmes […] and magazines” (xiv).

In *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus managed to obtain a secondary school certificate, and this despite the arduous journey upon which she had to embark. Yet, she was deprived of the opportunity to put her education to good use in a patriarchal society that promoted female subordination. In a last-ditch effort to gain independence and self-ownership, Firdaus turned to prostitution, yet her endeavours were also in vain, because Marzouq, a

male pimp, tried to subjugate her and steal her money. He treated her as if she were his own slave. Firdaus rejected Marzouq's marriage offer, which, in fact, was nothing but concealed exploitation, "I don't see the need for you to marry me as well. It's enough that you take what I earn. My body at least is mine". To this Marzouq replied, "I'm in business. My capital is women's bodies and I don't mix work and love together" (El Saadawi, 2007, 101). Interestingly, Di'aa, a friend and customer whose education and culture Firdaus admired most, told her that as a prostitute she could not possibly enjoy the others' respect. Paradoxically enough, a man, who seeks prostitutes and pays them money, accuses them of lacking respectability. In her desperate attempt to be respected in society, Firdaus abandoned prostitution and worked as a secretary in a big industrial company. However, this so-called 'respectable' job, which women have to pursue in order to gain the community's approval and acceptance, turned out to be another concealed form of prostitution.

Firdaus pondered over the miserable situation of female employees, whom male officials constantly exploited. They offered their bodies in exchange for a meal in a restaurant, a good yearly report or just to ensure that they would not be fired or transferred. They were treated as if they were commodities, "I now knew that all of us were prostitutes who sold themselves at varying prices, and that an expensive prostitute was better than a cheap one" (El Saadawi, 2007, 83). Each of them had its own price, but hers was going to be one of the highest. "It's not that I value my honour and my reputation more than the other girls, but my price is much higher than theirs" (El Saadawi, 2007, 83). Firdaus realized that, during the three years that she had worked for that company, she had not gained more respect and value than any other female employees. She thus became aware that being a prostitute was even better than working at a male-owned business, which simply turns females into male properties.

El Saadawi attempted to highlight the idea that women were victimized by the full connivance of law. She began her novel with a description of the horrible Qanatir prison, a gloomy place where her grief-stricken protagonist was locked up. "We enter tentatively and sit quietly, unobtrusively near the door. The room is dark and the air thick with sadness, despair and doom" (Cooke, 2007, vii). El Saadawi used prison and the imageries of

captivity to imply that the literal imprisonment of her heroine bore resemblance to the situation wherein women were confined by patriarchal oppressive institutions. Moreover, the recurrence of this image depicted her female characters as being always misjudged and enslaved creatures whom society must observe on apparently humanitarian grounds.

Foregrounding images of the prison experience are of great significance when creating fiction that can effectively reflect, criticize and underline the necessity of freedom, the most important goal in women's struggle. Abu-Rabi (2004) noted that the literary genre of prison writing is regarded as "a personal diagnosis of collective problems and a reflection of hope in desperation" (56). Despite the harsh situations that Firdaus had to cope with, her pursuit of emancipation never faltered. Firdaus finally found her freedom when she rejected official laws and conventions. However, such freedom was of a very limited nature, as it was always conditioned by social relations (Halldenius, 2007). Firdaus could only achieve liberty through mental independence.

She made many attempts, on different occasions, to rebel against the hypocritical social system that ostensibly followed the teachings of Islam and classified women as inferior. However, all of these attempts were seemingly in vain. It is only when Firdaus kills the male exploiter, confesses her crime and refuses to lodge an appeal to commute the penalty that she becomes empowered. It seems that death was the only option left to fulfil her wish of utter emancipation.

As Firdaus put it, "I have triumphed over both life and death. […] I want nothing. I hope for nothing. I fear nothing. Therefore I am free" (El Saadawi, 2007, 109). Although physically imprisoned in an enclosed space, she succeeded in achieving some kind of mental emancipation. By rejecting the rules imposed upon her by patriarchal institutions, Firdaus refused to take on the role enforced on her by society, thus becoming a free woman. In so doing, she reminds us of what Simone de Beauvoir wrote in *The Second Sex*, "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (1956, 273).

3.4. Firdaus's Insidious Trauma

We learn at the very beginning of the novel that El Saadawi, impersonated by the narrator of the story, was carrying out research on neurotic women in Qanatir Women's

Prison. There, the strange behavior of Firdaus, who refused to meet or talk to anyone, captured her attention. The narrator, who is a psychiatrist, found in Firdaus the exact sample she sought for her research, and that is why she desperately insisted on meeting her. “All my attempts to see Firdaus were of no avail. I felt somehow that my research was now in jeopardy”, the narrator stated (El Saadawi, 2007, 4).

According to Sigmund Freud, sexual abuse or other traumatic experiences can lead to the manifestation of neuroses (as cited in Felluga, 2002, par. 3). Taking into consideration that Firdaus is a real person whom the psychiatrist met and listened to, there is no doubt that all the repression, agony, humiliation and sexual abuses which characterized her traumatic life should have had a very negative effect upon her psyche.

Breuer and Freud (2009) also argued that “any experience which calls up distressing affects, such as those of fright, anxiety, shame or physical pain, may operate as [psychical] trauma” (2). They added that in some cases we have a number of “partial traumas forming a *group* of provoking causes”, and these, in turn, are able to “exercise a traumatic effect by summation and they belong together in so far as they are in part components of a single story of suffering” (2; emphasis in original).

Against this background, Laura Brown (1995) stated that most traumatic events occur secretly to the majority of females. She demonstrated that most of these events happen “in bed, where our fathers and stepfathers and uncles and older brothers molest us in the dead of night; behind the closed doors of marital relationships where men beat and sometimes rape their wives” (101). Such events are usually brought to the surface by feminists, who ask to look beyond the “public and male experiences of trauma” in order to consider private traumatic events which women often experience in their “interpersonal realm and at the hands of those [they] love and depend upon” (102). Brown (1995) also asserted that the therapists’ idea of trauma is often based on the diagnosis manuals and public discourse which have been written and informed by the dominant group. Consequently, the ‘private’, ‘secret’ and ‘insidious’ traumatic events which females suffer are not often regarded as such by males.

El Saadawi’s novel tells the story of Firdaus, a woman whose whole life was marked by different kinds of verbal, physical, sexual and psychological abuses. Firdaus was born into a poor family in a village, where females were treated as if they were slaves. Growing up in poverty and hardship, Firdaus had to work hard on the farm and at home since her very young age. She witnessed the cruelty and selfishness of her father. When one of his female children died, for example, Firdaus’s father “would have his supper, [her] mother would wash his legs, and then he would go to sleep”, as if nothing had happened. However, when the child that died was a male, he “would beat [her] mother, then have his supper and lie down to sleep” (El Saadawi, 2007, 17). Like her mother and sisters, Firdaus experienced going to bed hungry whereas all the food they had was devoured by her father: “One evening I dared to stretch out my hand to his plate, but he struck me a sharp blow over the back of my fingers. I was so hungry that I could not cry”, said Firdaus (El Saadawi, 2007, 18).

As a very young girl, Firdaus was circumcised, an experience that brought her much physical and psychological suffering. In her discussion about the psychological distress and anguish that circumcised girls endure, Mary Daly (1996) stated that, in most cases in which females have undergone unspeakable atrocities of circumcision, these females are “effectively silenced” (32). Daly also argued that such “profound silencing of the mind’s imaginative and critical powers” is a principal function of the “sado-ritual”, which indoctrinates females to constantly remember to kill their “own divinity” (32). She also added that “those who physically survive these atrocities live their entire lifetimes, from early childhood or from puberty, preoccupied by pain” (32). Throughout the novel, Firdaus repeatedly referred to the torment she endured as a consequence of circumcision.

> My whole body shuddered with a faraway yet familiar pleasure arising from some unknown source, from some indefinable spot outside my being. And yet I could feel it somewhere in my body, a gentle pulsation beginning like a tender pleasure, and ending like a tender pain. Something I tried to hold on to, to touch if only for a moment, but it slipped away from me like the air, like an illusion, or a dream that floats away and is lost. I wept in my sleep as though it was something I was losing

> now; a loss I was experiencing for the first time, and not something I had lost a long time ago. (El Saadawi, 2007, 25)

After the death of her father, Firdaus moved to live with her uncle in the capital where he studied religion. She was regularly molested by him before he got married. This experience brought back painful memories and made her realize, once again, how circumcision had deprived her of sexual pleasure, which she had once experienced when playing bride and bridegroom with Mohammadain, a little boy from her village.

> He [her uncle] was doing to me what Mohammadain had done to me before. In fact, he was doing even more, but I no longer felt the strong sensation of pleasure that radiated from an unknown and yet familiar part of my body. I closed my eyes and tried to reach the pleasure I had known before but in vain. It was as if I could no longer recall the exact spot from which it used to arise, or as though a part of me, of my being, was gone and would never return. (El Saadawi, 2007, 13)

In her uncle's house, Firdaus was bound to do the household chores, and then her uncle's wife married her off to an old man, who turned her life into a real hell. She fled her husband's house to find herself helplessly living in the street. Seeking shelter in Bayoumi's flat, she was severely beaten and gang raped. Escaping Bayoumi's prison, Firdaus resorted to prostitution and was exploited by Marzouk, a pimp who only allowed her to work under his 'protection'. Marzouk told Firdaus:

> Every prostitute has a pimp to protect her from other pimps, and from the police. That's what I'm going to do. … There isn't a woman on earth who can protect herself. […]. You cannot do without protection, otherwise the profession exercised by husbands and pimps would die out. (El Saadawi, 2007, 100)

To end up her tragedy and free herself from male domination, Firdaus stabbed Marzouk and was condemned to death sentence for her crime. According to Maria Root, the "traumatogenic effects of oppression" are not necessarily "overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment". However, they "do violence to the soul and spirit" (as cited in Brown, 1995, 107). Root termed this concept "insidious

trauma”, one to which most women in Muslim societies are exposed, because such humiliating practices are considered normal in these societies. In her wretched life, Firdaus experienced various forms of physical and spiritual violence, which were systematically justified on religious and conventional grounds. According to Cooke (2007), in El Saadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus “recounts a lifetime of betrayal and abuse. She is an orphan who was passed from one abusive guardian to another, and her tale shows how trust is tested and finally erodes, leaving behind only fear and alienation (vii). Firdaus is “literally broken inside”; the numbness, passivity, conformity, “complete indifference to everything” and “attitude of total rejection” which Firdaus showed at the very end of the novel are unmistakable symptoms of the insidious trauma she suffered (El Saadawi, 2007, 4).

3.5. Marriage as Enslavement

In Muslim females’ writing, marriage is frequently viewed as a fundamentally patriarchal institution in which women are subjugated. It can also be seen as the closest analogue to the feudal system, which also prevailed in most Muslim societies, particularly during and after colonization. With the help of the biased interpretation of religious texts and the strict observation of traditions, women lose their own independent identity and become related to their husbands immediately after marriage. It is during marriage too that the very social existence of woman is reduced or suspended to be subsumed into that of her husband.

As has been often said, El Saadawi had her own critical view regarding marriage. She argued that women are physically, psychologically and mentally subjugated in marriage. This subjection is commonly justified on moral, legal, traditional and religious grounds. These religiously enshrined conventions, in turn, allow men to marry more than one wife, divorce their wives with or without a reason, insult and beat them and confine them to the home. El Saadawi (2006b) demonstrated that the marriage certificate is no more than a contract whereby women are legally possessed by men (25). She was considered to be an extremist in her ideas regarding marriage. El Saadawi depicted it as a worse form of prostitution in which women are not even paid. To quote from the novel: “Because I was intelligent I preferred to be a free prostitute, rather than an enslaved wife” (El Saadawi,

2007, 99). El Saadawi's views on marriage are thus in complete contradiction to Iqbalunnisa Hussain's, who describes marriage as "the only career and the goal of life of our girls" (2015, 94).

In most Muslim communities, marriage has functioned as a means whereby an uneducated woman can make her living instead of accessing professional employment, which is very rare among uneducated Muslim women. However, El Saadawi (1990b) asserted that any male-female relationship, particularly the marital one, loses its uprightness and lofty aims when it is based on a beneficial or commercial foundation. According to El Saadawi, such a relationship is the exact meaning of legalized prostitution. She inferred that the female prostitute is paid for her relationship with the man, whereas the male prostitute is the one who pays to initiate the relationship with the woman. There is no doubt that it is the man who seeks the prostitute and pays her, i.e. he is the active party in the practice/ transaction of prostitution. Therefore, his share of the responsibility must be greater than that of the woman, El Saadawi affirmed (1990b). Yet, patriarchal society only condemns women. Even the word 'prostitute' is not used but for women. On justifying men's dishonorable deeds and infidelity, Iqbalunnisa Hussain (2015) ironically commented, "There are no such hard and fast laws for him as of breaking the marital ties. He, with all his fancies, is the noblest being ever born among the creations of God" (97).

El Saadawi concluded that if 'prostitute' simply means a woman who accepts a sexual relationship with a man for utilitarian interests, this definition will apply to any woman who accepts a sexual relationship with a man for commercial or beneficial reasons. Thus, any existing marital relationship which is founded on utilitarian interests does not differ, in its essence, from prostitution. There might be a difference in form, but the content is the same: in both cases there is lack of mutual real love between the two parties, without which the two relationships become dishonorable (El Saadawi, 1990a, 109).

In short, El Saadawi considered all women to be prostitutes as regards their relationships with men as long as their relationships are not founded on real love and mutual respect. She went on to state, in Firdaus's words, that a prostitute's life is even better than that of a married woman. "When I was a prostitute I never gave anything for

nothing, but always took something in return. But in love I gave my body and my soul, my mind and all the effort I could muster, freely" (El Saadawi, 2007, 93). Unlike a married woman, a prostitute offers her body only but keeps her heart and soul to herself, "I offered them only an outer shell" (El Saadawi, 2007, 93). Firdaus finally concluded that women are deluded by the patriarchal virtues that they are supposed to pursue:

> A successful prostitute was better than a misled saint. All women are victims of deception. Men impose deception on women and punish them for being deceived, force them down to the lowest level and punish them for falling so low, bind them in marriage and then chastise them with menial service for life, or insults, or blows. (El Saadawi, 2007, 93)

El Saadawi highlighted elements of frustration and limitation, particularly when delineating her female characters. She was severely critical when discussing the subject of marriage and the incapacitation it imposes on women. Not only did El Saadawi have a very pessimistic outlook of the male-female relationship, but she also advocated separation. She considered marriage as a process of women's enslavement and commodification which should be rectified (Daniel, 2014, 123). All the heterosexual relationships portrayed in *Woman at Point Zero* are master-slave ones. The father and husband images, in particular, represent male absolute tyranny over powerless daughters and wives.

Firdaus recalled her father's cruelty and the enslavement he imposed on his family. He "exchang[ed] his virgin daughter for a dowry when there was still time […] beat his wife and made her bite the dust each night" (El Saadawi, 2007, 12). Neither were Firdaus's mother nor her sisters allowed to eat with the father under any circumstances, "He would sit eating alone while we watched him" (El Saadawi, 2007, 19). When there was not enough, all they had was given to the father while the rest went to bed on empty stomachs (El Saadawi, 2007, 19). At the age of nineteen, Firdaus was married off to Sheikh Mahmoud, a cleric who was an extremely mean man in his sixties. Her misery then became even worse. Ironically, Sheikh Mahmoud, the representative of Islam and its fair laws, used to beat her often. On one occasion, Firdaus says, "he hit me all over with his shoe. My face and body became swollen and bruised" (El Saadawi, 2007, 48). When Firdaus complained

to her uncle, another cleric, she was told that religion permits such punishment and the virtuous wife is not supposed to complain, "[woman's] duty was perfect obedience" (El Saadawi, 2007, 48).

When she went back to live with Sheikh Mahmoud, Firdaus had to endure her husband's continuous insulting and disparaging. He repeatedly scolded and reminded her of the favour she owed him, "why did you come back from your uncle's house? Couldn't he bear to feed you for a few days?" (El Saadawi, 2007, 49). He reprimanded her all the time and told her not to forget that he was the only person who could tolerate and feed her. Before leaving her husband's house again never to return, Sheikh Mahmoud beat her brutally, "he hit me with his heavy stick until the blood ran from my nose and ears" (El Saadawi, 2007, 49). By introducing marriage in such a way, El Saadawi attempted to show that marriage is an ideologically patriarchal institution that draws its power from women's subjugation. Moreover, her heroine's desperate attempts to escape also indicate that home represents a repressive place where women are oppressed and confined.

3.6. Women's Education as a Weapon to Challenge Patriarchy

At the beginning of the twentieth century, women were denied education in most Muslim countries. As a result, they were rendered inferior in their communities (Fwangyil, 2012, 22). Nevertheless, intellectuals such as Iqbalunissa Hussain and Nawal EI Saadawi, to mention but two, allocated special importance to the subject of woman's education, not only in their writings, but also in their lives as activists. EI Saadawi took great pains to educate women and make them aware of their rights as humans and citizens, to make them realize that they are equal to their male counterparts. In 1981, El Saadawi founded AWSA (Arab Women's Solidarity Association), the first legal and independent feminist organization in Egypt. AWSA aimed at encouraging women to set themselves free from any form of domination, accessing proper education, breaking down stereotypes and promoting solidarity in favour of the emancipation of women and living together in diversity. To serve humanity in general and women in particular, El Saadawi's endeavours and efforts were outstanding. As is argued by Spath (2005):

> El Saadawi is one of the world's most important female activists, never yielding to opposition or compromising her values or beliefs, shedding new light on and educating both men and women on many issues such as rights and sexuality, and inspiring women all over the world to unite and fight the oppression with which they are faced. (3)

In many of her fictional and non-fictional works, her well known book *Al-Wajh al-'Ari* (1977) being a good example, El Saadawi put the emphasis on women's education and its relevance to improve their conditions. She censured the education that females received, especially in the Arab Muslim world in the first half of the twentieth century. Among other things, females were taught "a series of continuous warnings" that dictated them not to approach the ideas that were religiously alleged to be "harmful, forbidden, shameful or outlawed" (El Saadawi, 1980, 13).

El Saadawi (1980) explained that in such educational systems girls would be trained to suppress their own desires and render themselves void of "authentic and original" feminine needs and desires (13). The gap resulting would be filled up with patriarchal mandates. In this way, female education turned out to be a prolonged process of "annihilation, a gradual throttling of [female] personality and mind, leaving intact only the outside shell, the body […] that moves like a wound-up rubber doll" (El Saadawi, 1980, 13). Doing away with women's personalities and their ability to think independently or use their minds effectively would result in achieving the ultimate patriarchal aim, namely, to keep women helplessly dominated. El Saadawi concluded that, in order to be capable of facing up to the absolute hegemony of males, females should arm themselves with proper education; without it, women cannot possibly achieve their targets, escape subjugating ignorance, and experience utter emancipation.

In *Woman at Point Zero,* the motif of education and its significance repeatedly appears. As a young girl, Firdaus often begged her uncle, who studied religion in El Azhar, to take her with him to Cairo to study there, too. However, her uncle ridiculed her and said, "El Azhar was only for men" (El Saadawi, 2007, 16). Given that El Azhar is the biggest and most prestigious Islamic and educational institution in the world, and the third biggest

university, prohibiting women from entering El Azhar implies two important issues: first, women are deprived of their natural right to receive education similar to men's; secondly, Islamic affairs and the interpretation of religious texts are monopolized by men. These matters, in particular, have occupied Islamic feminists' thinking and become the main topic of their speeches and writings. Like Iqbalunissa Hussain, El Saadawi affirmed that, when education is equally ensured for everybody without distinction, it becomes the best means to do away with social classism. Firdaus was lower class by birth. However, "with [her] secondary school certificate [she] belonged to the middle class" (El Saadawi, 2007, 12).

Firdaus had to live a particularly tough life that forced her to dwell in different places. However, wherever she went, she always took her certificate with her. Thus, when she knew about her uncle and his wife's plan to marry her off to a very mean old man, Firdaus fled her uncle's house carrying only this, "I opened my small bag […] and placed my secondary school certificate and my certificate of merit on top before closing it" (El Saadawi, 2007, 41). She also did the same when she left her husband's house for good. Moreover, when she became a "successful prostitute" owning a luxurious house, Firdaus "had hung some good paintings, and right in the middle was [her] secondary school certificate surrounded by an expensive frame" (El Saadawi, 2007, 75). She repeatedly referred to her certificate as if it were a weapon she could defend herself with or prove her potential in front of the men she encountered. "I still have my secondary school certificate […] I don't want to be anybody's slave" (El Saadawi, 2007, 103), Firdaus shouts at the end of the novel. Firdaus wanted to believe that holding an academic certificate would turn her into an independent woman and allow her to enjoy her natural rights, just as other members of her society did. Unfortunately, she was ahead of her times, as very few people, especially men, were willing to allow something like this to happen.

Chapter 4

4.1. Leila Aboulela as an Islamist Novelist

Leila Fu'ad Aboulela was born in Egypt in 1964 to an Egyptian mother and a Sudanese father. When she was only six weeks old, she moved to live in Khartoum, Sudan, with her parents (Aboulela, 2005a; Chambers, 2009, 86). Her earliest contact with western culture came at the age of seven, when her parents enrolled her and her younger brother in the Khartoum American School in Sudan. She received her primary education there and at the Sisters' School, a private Catholic High School, where she learned English. There she read many American children's books, such as *Little House on the Prairie* and *Harriet the Spy,* which made her fall in love with reading. According to Aboulela, such books seemed "very remote from [her] own world, but were more comforting than school where there weren't many Sudanese children and [she] was very aware of the culture shock" (Wilce, 2000, par. 1).

In 1985, Aboulela graduated from the University of Khartoum with a degree in Economics (Aboulela, 2005a; Akyeampong, Gates, & Niven, 2012, 48). In 1987, she moved to Britain to live, first with her mother and brother, and then with her husband in Scotland (Al-Idwani, 2005, par. 3). Her personality was shaped, to a certain degree, by the western education she was exposed to from a very young age and her later MA and PhD studies in London. Aboulela was also influenced by the Qur'anic stories related by her grandmother and adults' discussions of the Islamic law.

For Aboulela, the real spiritual faith is not acquired in the same way as people assimilate customs. Instead, people could be born with that ready-made belief somewhere embedded in their minds. Such a thesis was put forward by Justin L. Barrett (2012), who called these people 'born believers'. Brandon Ambrosino (2014), for his part, asserted that children are inclined to think that the world has order and purpose. They tend to believe that there is some kind of supernatural agent behind everything (par. 1). However, a new study carried out by Kathleen Corriveau, Eva Chen and Paul Harris (2015) contravened Barrett's thesis: they tried to demonstrate that children's beliefs in the supernatural are the

result of education, and argued that "exposure to religious ideas has a powerful impact on children's differentiation between reality and fiction" (353).

Aboulela herself stated that she did not "remember when [she] learned that Allah existed just as [she did not] remember when [she] learned [her] name (Aboulela, 2007a, par. 2). Additionally, she was highly influenced by her unconventional mother. As she put it: "My mother instilled a spiritual awareness in me from an early age" (Aboulela, 2007a, par. 2). In an interview, she insisted that her faith was started off by both her mother and grandmother, who were at the same time "very progressive" (Sethi, 2005, par. 5). Her grandmother studied medicine in the 1940s, and her mother was a university professor, something "very rare in Egypt" at that time (Sethi, 2005, par. 5). Aboulela declared:

> My mother is a wonderful person, very open-minded and progressive, and she taught me a lot of things that I still use, even though literature is not her field at all. […] She was one of the few women in Khartoum who worked, one of the few women who could drive. (as cited in Majed, 2015, 198)

Following the steps of her Egyptian mother, Aboulela also took for granted the freedom to enjoy all the privileges that people can have in modern societies, although one should be aware of the fact that freedom in a non-Muslim western society is dramatically different from the one that a woman can enjoy in a Muslim conservative one. As regards her religious views on the cause of women, she was not simply concerned with their inability to work or how they had to look in public. Instead, she was mainly worried about faith and the spiritual relationship with the Creator (Sethi, 2005, par. 5).

Although she lived in a conservative/ traditional Muslim society in Sudan, Aboulela did not express her own ideas about religion until she arrived in London to pursue her PhD studies at the London School of Economics. There, she acquired the freedom she needed to articulate her concerns regarding Islam. When she was asked in an interview if Muslim women had more freedom to be religious in London, she replied, "Oh, definitely", and then went on to say: "but then you have to decide what you are going to do with all this freedom" and added, "You can do what you like, so being religious is one of the things I chose" (Sethi, 2005, par. 7).

Aboulela stated that she "grew up in a very westernized environment and went to a private, American school", yet she was shy and had a quiet personality (Sethi, 2005, par. 3). She "wanted to wear the hijab but didn't have the courage", because she knew that her progressive friends "would talk [her] out of it" (Sethi, 2005, par. 3). According to Sethi, being anonymous in London helped her much. She declared: "I didn't know anybody. It was 1989 and the word 'Muslim' wasn't even really used in Britain at the time; you were either black or Asian. So then I felt very free to wear the hijab" (Sethi, 2005, par. 6).

The freedom offered by her family in Sudan, together with the western education she received and her first-hand experience in the West, shaped her first impression of Islam and its principles. Nonetheless, only after her moving to London and then to Aberdeen did her deep and spiritual perception of Islam start to take shape. It was there that she became able to express her deep faith in Islam and its principles. Like many other Muslim women living in the diaspora, Aboulela found enough freedom in the West to decide whether to be religious or break with Islamic teachings altogether. She claimed that the more freedom a Muslim woman is offered, the more religious she may become. In her novel *Minaret* she brought to light her religious views in the figure of her protagonist, Najwa.

Like Aboulela herself, Najwa was completely free to choose her way of life in a western society, where no one could dictate her what she should or should not do. It was her faith in the potential power of Islam that alone guided her. As she said to herself: "I'm in London, I can do what I like, no one can see me. Fascinating. I could order a glass of wine. Who would stop me or even look surprised? There was a curiosity in me but not enough to spin me into action" (Aboulela, 2005b, 93). However, before coming to terms with her faith, Najwa felt rather confused. Looking at people walking fast, "knowing where they were going", she found herself heading aimlessly, desperately, in need of guidance. Again, she looked at the magazines in the newsagent and thought, "I could buy one of those rude magazines […]. No one would stop me or look surprised. I would carry it home and I wouldn't even need to hide it. I could plonk it on my bedside table and no one would see it" (Aboulela, 2005b, 93). She hesitated and bought a copy of *Slimming*. Yet, her incipient faith in Islam took the upper hand whenever she felt driven by her whims and temptations:

"I understood the line 'I've lived to bury my desires'. But I did not know from where this understanding came", Najwa thought (Aboulela, 2005b, 9).

Aboulela moved to Aberdeen with her husband and children in 1990. This move was what inspired her to write. She began writing in 1992 while working as a lecturer in Aberdeen College and later as a research assistant in Aberdeen University. Aboulela's short story "The Museum", which first appeared in her collection of short stories *The Coloured Lights* (2001), became the first winner of the Cane Prize for African literature, and her first two novels, *The Translator* (1999) and *Minaret* (2005), were long-listed for the Orange Prize awarded to the best fiction by women writers in Britain. These two novels were also listed for the IMPAC Dublin Award, which is presented each year for a novel written or translated into English. Aboulela's novel *Lyrics Alley* (2010) won the Scottish Book Award and was short-listed for a Regional Commonwealth Writers Prize. Finally, her most recent books are the novel *Bird Summons* (2019) and the short-story collection *Elsewhere, Home* (2019), which won the 2018 Saltire Fiction Book of the Year Award.

It is also worth noting that her first novel, *The Translator*, received very positive reviews in the western cultural scene, and was compared to the Sudanese novelist Al-Tayyib Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*. On account of its newfangled representation of Muslims, Aboulela's first novel, also labelled as 'halal fiction', has been translated from English into a number of languages, such as Arabic, German, Spanish and French. Written with a direct and forceful Islamist tone, *Minaret* is an insightful reading of Islam and its culture, about which the West has only recently started to inquire. This novel sheds light on the situation of Muslim women in the West, while focusing on issues such as having a hybrid identity and searching for the self in a hostile environment, particularly after the events of the eleventh of September 2001.

In view of the fact that *Minaret* is an "immigrant novel" (Hunter, 2013, 87), Aboulela endeavoured to assert the values of Islam and her faith in a non-Muslim society. She fictionalized her efforts to cope with the challenges she had to face up to when living in a strange culture with multiple identities, and embraced a perspective dramatically

different from that adopted by other Muslim feminist writers. In an attempt to change the prevailing western perspective about Islam, which envisions it as being wholly misogynist in its teachings regarding women and their position in society, Aboulela delineated her female heroines in a way that was compatible with the most conservative interpretation of the Muslim faith. She has once and again tried to communicate the message that following the real and undistorted Islam will ultimately ensure women's welfare. This is why she frequently draws attention to the special status that Islam accords to women. She believes in the potential social fairness that Islam preaches, and associates every egalitarian principle with Islamic beliefs. From her very young age, she perceived that Islam and the West are not contradictory in their essential values.

She wrote fiction to support these views and invite Muslims in the West to make the best use of real Islam and reconcile its main tenets with those of western culture. Sadia Abbas (2011) believed that any "clash between the devout man and the devout woman, between female desire and divine command might confirm unsympathetic western perceptions, which are often unsurprisingly ready to leap to self-flattering prejudice" (441). It is this prejudice that Aboulela endeavoured to alter in her writings.

In *Minaret*, as in most of her works, Aboulela makes use of a distinct form of Islamic feminism, which introduces Islamic women's activism as the "manifestation of alternative experiences and definitions of modernity within religion, and analyses Islamist women's activism and pietist women's movements as separate from or in opposition to secular forms of activism" (Zahra, 2019, 47). Almost all of Aboulela's works are characterized by their distinctive exploration of Islamic spirituality, identity and migration. They highlight the challenges that Muslims face in the West, and tell the stories of flawed complex characters who struggle to make choices using Muslim logic (Aboulela, 2021, par. 1). Simultaneously, they explore significant political matters indirectly.

Among other major issues that her novels bring to light are the marginalization of African Muslim women in the diaspora and the identification of the pretexts on which both Muslim and non-Muslim patriarchies rely. They also investigate issues of belonging through the depiction of the challenges that creating a home in the diaspora necessarily

implies. Generally speaking, her fiction focuses on the misapprehensions of cultural discrepancies; it explores the possibility of living in a secular environment while being also rooted in a conservative Muslim community which apparently counters dominant western values. *Minaret*, for instance, strives to explore the contradictory experience of being a Muslim and living in a western society as complex as that of the city of London, by no means sympathetic towards Muslims especially after 9/11, 2001. Last but not least, it is worth mentioning that Aboulela's relocation from Khartoum to Aberdeen in her mid-twenties had a huge impact on her life and works.

4.1.1. *Minaret* and Aboulela's Portrait of Islam

Aboulela's *Minaret* is an engaging story about a young Muslim woman, Najwa, who led a privileged and secular life in her homeland, Sudan. Then her life was turned upside down, to the point that she ended up living impoverished and lonely in London. It was then that she gradually began to embrace her Islamic faith. Having been an upper-class westernized Sudanese woman and a university student in Khartoum, Najwa would have never imagined that she should eventually become a maid. In London, she lost her family, her money and her virginity, till she finally resorted to the mosque. It was there that Najwa managed to get a job as a maid at Lamya's house. In addition to cleaning and cooking, she looked after Mai, Lamya's little daughter. To make matters even more complicated, Najwa fell in love with Lamya's brother, Tamer, a contentiously devout young man with whom she discovered a common bond in faith. Notwithstanding this, they were forced to put an end to their relationship, which provoked outrage in the family on account of their age difference (she was nineteen years older than Tamer) and her lower social position. Her relationship with Tamer finally resulted in her losing her job in Lamya's house.

Aboulela uses the first person narration to tell the whole story through the experience of her heroine, Najwa. There are no other narrative voices but Najwa's and, although the narrative on the whole seems quite objective, when it comes to intimate disclosure it sometimes falters. Najwa's relationship with Anwar and the failure of this relationship, for instance, occupy only a small section of the novel, although it is clear that it would later on have a huge negative impact on her life: this failed relationship would be the main reason for the deterioration of Najwa's life and her financial situation, because

she gave Anwar, her Sudanese boyfriend, all her money so that he could pursue his postgraduate studies in London.

The story unfolds in three different settings. In the first place, the reader knows about Najwa's early life and her traditional Muslim community in her homeland, Sudan. She was a daughter of an aristocratic family that lived lavishly there. Secondly, the reader is informed of Najwa's displacement when her family was forced to flee the country after the military coup, which resulted in the execution of her corrupted father. Once in exile, her family suffered a stressful social and financial degradation, with very few relations in a non-Muslim community. After the death of her mother and the imprisonment of her brother Omar, Najwa had to navigate between her previous privileged life and her current downgraded one; she was compelled to work as a maid for an Arabian family in London to make ends meet.

Najwa also had to negotiate between her old westernized lifestyle and her recently adopted religious one: "I am not sure who I am, the Najwa who danced at the American Club disco in Khartoum or Najwa, the maid Lamya hired by walking into the Central Mosque one afternoon. I move up and down" (Aboulela, 2005b, 80). Her association with a group of moderate Muslim women at the mosque prompted her struggle between her former secular outlook of the world and her latter acquisition of a new religious consciousness. She found companionship and solace within this Muslim female community and, most importantly, no longer felt alone in an unfamiliar country.

The third part of the novel focuses on Najwa's recently adopted Islamic identity and her strong attachment to this Muslim community at the mosque: "I am happy that I belong here, that I am no longer outside, no longer defiant" (Aboulela, 2005b, 153). However, Najwa's renewed identity, depicted as being worthy of global acceptance and as an inspiring example for other women from different Muslim backgrounds, only came out after she had dissociated herself from her old secular friends and life.

Aboulela opens her novel with the protagonist's description and foreshadowing of her degrading status. Najwa comments on her exile pitiful condition before moving back in time to tell about her and her family's life in Sudan. "I`ve come down in the world. I've

slid to a place where the ceiling is low and there isn't much room for me to move" (Aboulela, 2005b, 1). With these words, Najwa informs the reader of her anxiety; she feels isolated in a community to which she does not belong, despite her desperate attempts to adapt by leading a westernized lifestyle. Unless she finds a savior, her "com[ing] down" in such a community will increase even more. This only serves to indicate the gap between her and Islam. In London, she was made to suffer the Islamophobia that 9/11 had generated in most western counties.

Spending all the family money, first on the medication of her mother till she finally dies, and then on her brother's addiction to drugs till he is finally imprisoned, rendered Najwa's life miserable. There was nobody from whom she could seek help or support. She used to live in luxury and surrounded by her relatives, who assisted and cared for her all the time. Such utterly different circumstances marked Najwa's first experience of leading a harsh life, but also opened up a new path for her to follow: "Routine is ruffled and a new start makes me suddenly conscious of what I've become" (Aboulela, 2005b, 1). She reached the conclusion that her current situation had been partly determined by her past life. Moreover, her affiliation to the community of Muslim women in the mosque, together with her new perception of Islam and its principles, dramatically changed her views of the world in general and of her life as a Muslim woman in a western society in particular. After all the pessimism and depression she had gone through, Najwa's epiphany finally occurred. She began to look at life optimistically. In lieu of "com[ing] down", Najwa started to "look up and see the minaret of Regent's Park mosque visible above the trees". She had "never seen it so early in the morning in this vulnerable light" (Aboulela, 2005b, 1). London, whose streets were "covered with autumn leaves", all of a sudden became a welcoming place in Najwa's eyes. She even compared the city to herself: "Now it is poised like a mature woman whose beauty is no longer fresh but still surprisingly potent" (Aboulela, 2005b, 1). Najwa was then in her mid-thirties, trying to cope with social and financial difficulties completely on her own.

She managed to derive her strength and inspiration from her renewed belief in Islam and the new identity which linked her to a Muslim female community. The minaret of Regent's Park mosque, which now looked "visible above the trees" to Najwa, suddenly

signified a safe place to which all Muslims could resort. At the same time, it represented the transnational Muslim identity with which Muslims could identify, regardless of other kinds of considerations. As was explained in chapter one, Muslims internalized the culture and traditions of conquered lands, and integrated them as part of their Islamic teachings. Thus, the version of Islam in South Asian countries, to give but one instance, was different from that of Africans. Different versions of Islam developed in different Muslim societies, although the main and only source of Islamic teachings was the Qur'an as preached by the prophet. However, as was argued before, the various interpretations of the Qur'an were, and still are, a source of controversy and debate among the several Islamic schools and *sharia* (laws that govern day-to-day aspects of Muslim life).

Islam is, therefore, by no means monolithic. The grandiloquent language in which the Qur'an was written demanded that the Prophet Mohammed's *el hadith* and *sunnah* (prophet Mohammed's reported sayings and deeds) should be involved in its explanation. However, it eventually turned out that some of the prophet's allegedly true *hadith* and *sunnah* were either inaccurate or made up on purpose. This has always been the main bone of contention among Muslim scholars, whose more often than not patriarchal interpretations have recurrently been employed to dominate and oppress women. In fact, it is this distortion of Islam that has distorted its image in the eyes of non-Muslims.

As Ayesha Imam, a Nigerian theorist and activist, argued, 'Islam' and 'Muslim' are not interchangeable terms. She believes that such differentiation will help to avoid "essentializing Islam as an a-historical, disembodied ideal which is more or less imperfectly actualized in this or that community" (2015, 51). Aboulela also refers to such Islamic diversity in *Minaret* by introducing divergent Muslim communities in the Regent's Park mosque. Here, Muslims were all treated equally, regardless of their backgrounds, because Islam does not distinguish among people. Aboulela is, in short, quite aware that Islam is only one, and that all its various versions are merely the result of different historical, political, economic and sociological backgrounds. Talking to her Sudanese boyfriend, Anwar, Najwa wondered:

> 'What's wrong with us Africans?' I asked Anwar and he knew. He knew facts and history. But nothing he said gave me comfort or hope. The more he talked, the more confused I felt, groping for something simple. Everything was complicated, everything was connected to history and economics. (Aboulela, 2005b, 120)

Aboulela strived in her writings to contribute a different Islamic image that might refute what was introduced by other Muslim writers in both East and West. She introduced a conservative version of Islam to be practiced anywhere and at any time, regardless of the prevalence of other religions and non-Muslim traditions. No doubt her fiction invites readers to think about Islam and Muslims differently, not as the single homogeneous structure often portrayed by western media (Hunter, 2013, 88). Each Muslim community has its own, sometimes unique, set of beliefs and traditions, which are not always accepted in other Muslim communities.

After having lost her bearings in the tumultuous western society, Najwa headed to the minaret of the mosque as if she were a lost ship in search of a lighthouse. Being alone in London, Najwa felt alienated. However, as a result of her religious conversion, she started to believe that, as long as she kept her faith, she was not alone, since God was always there caring for those who believe in Him. Being on God's side, she found herself always happy and protected, as is stated in the Qur'an, "Behold! the friends of Allah shall certainly have no fear, nor shall they grieve" (Qur'an 10:62). Thus, when Najwa felt that she was in danger and that some young English men tried to hurt her on the bus, she began to pray to God for protection.

> I know just by glancing at them that they are not reliable, they are not harmless. I start to recite Say: I seek refuge in the Lord of Daybreak. I recite it again and again. As they walk past to the back of the bus, one of them looks at me and says something to the others. I look away out of the window. I tell myself that Allah will protect me so that even if they hurt me, I won't feel it too badly; it will be a blunted blow, a numbed blow. (Aboulela, 2005b, 57)

When her disillusionment with Anwar, her old unscrupulous boyfriend, increased, Najwa again sought refuge and found strength in her new-found faith. "I yearned to go

back to being safe with God", Najwa thought (Aboulela, 2005b, 179). Such a discourse seems to be an invitation to Muslim immigrants, women in particular, to be on God's side as the only savior and protector. Practising Islam on the part of a Muslim woman in an unsympathetic environment thus seems to provide the major themes of Aboulela's fiction. Her 'halal fiction' does not only become an example of "transcultural and transnational literature", as some critics believe (Akyeampong, et al., 2012, 49), but it also propagates Islamist feminist thoughts in the West. Unlike most stereotypical western emancipatory stories, Aboulela's *Minaret* has Islam as the prominent catalyst in the protagonist's empowerment and identity. Through such a work, Aboulela further endeavoured to highlight that western secular feminism does not always suit Muslim believing women, no matter whether they live in their homeland or in the diaspora; Muslim women are thus shown in need of an Islamist activism through which they can express themselves and claim the rights that Islam ensured for them.

4.1.2. Aboulela's Feminist Struggle and the West

As has already been said, although the influence of western culture was vital for Aboulela's personality, she did never distance herself from Islam and its teachings. Instead, she clung to a moderate form of Islam, dramatically different from the conservative Muslim outlook of life she was rooted in. Moreover, Aboulela did not antagonize the West nor criticize its culture, as fundamentalists do. She rather admired its positive aspects. Unlike fundamentalists, Aboulela asserts that there is no need to choose between western materialism and Islamic spiritualism, as both can be integrated; she has encouraged Muslims to make the most of the positive elements of both. She has frequently attempted to highlight the positive aspects that Islam shares with western culture, particularly the freedom which is defended by Islam but mainly exists in the western non-Muslim world. This is how she put it:

> I read [western books] again and again, and even though I knew that the characters were not Muslim, I found Muslim values in those novels. I found spiritual journeys, and familiar depictions of the rigor and patience needed to discipline the ego. […] I appreciate the West. I love its literature, its transparency and its energy. I admire its work ethic and its fairness. I need its technology and its medicine, and I want

my children to have a western education. At the same time, I am fulfilled in my religion. Nothing can compete with the elegance, authority and details of the Qur'an. (Aboulela, 2007b, par. 4, 5)

It is obvious that Aboulela has been aware that real Muslims and Westerners are not in opposition, but rather share some common values. As was explained in chapter one, the advent of Islam laid the foundation of an egalitarian society in which the rights of all people were to be preserved. A society with such characteristics is what Westerners often claim to have. This often leads them to regard their culture as superior to those which discriminate between their people on the basis of gender, religion or race. Unfortunately, the prevalence of old-time traditions, together with their intermingling with true Islamic rules and teachings, have tarnished the true image of Islam, particularly in conventional societies like the Sudanese, where traditional practices are strictly imposed, particularly on women.

In *Minaret*, Aboulela endeavoured to show both the positive and negative aspects that Muslim women might come across in the West. She pointed out that the existence of mosques, together with the freedom to choose, worship and practice all sorts of congregational activities, are the most positive aspects in a multicultural environment like that of London. On the other hand, she made no secret of the fact that being a Muslim among a non-Muslim majority often implies coping with minor racist attacks and the western sense of superiority.

Aboulela's success and the fame she has gained in penning such novels, crafting a language that transcends cultural and religious differences, has rendered her one of the first Muslim immigrants who have deliberately focused on Islam, its logic and its coexistence with other religions and cultures. On the other hand, she has often implicitly criticized western feminism because she finds it incompatible with the peculiarity of Muslim women's traditions and circumstances. Like Hussain, El Saadawi and Mamdouh, Aboulela rejects the western feminist postulates that aim at dominating other feminist movements, particularly those of Muslim women.

As attested by Hassan (2014), Anwar, Najwa's boyfriend, is the only character in the novel who "comes close to expressing feminist views" which could relate to those of western feminism (315). It could be argued that Anwar represents the western secular feminism that Aboulela rejects; like other Muslim feminists, she has often deemed western feminism a colonizer that seeks to dominate other feminist hues worldwide. Significantly enough, Anwar dominated Najwa and treated her wickedly. He accused her of being "brainwashed", alleging that "Arab society is hypocritical […] with double standards for men and women" (Aboulela, 2005b, 128). He maintained that "most of the guys in university used to visit brothels. Then they would beat up their sister if they so much as saw her talking to a boy" (Aboulela, 2005b, 128). Moreover, Anwar condemned Islam as backward, and fundamentalists as being responsible for terrorism, the civil war in Sudan, the violation of human rights and the silencing of free voices.

Najwa suffered in her own flesh the gender inequality resulting from misusing and manipulating religion in her Muslim patriarchal society. This prevented her from responding to Anwar's accusations, and led her to say: "but that was exactly where I got lost. I did not want to look at these big things because they overwhelmed me" (Aboulela, 2005b, 178). And added, "I wanted me, my feelings and dreams, my fear of illness, old age and ugliness, my guilt when I was with [Anwar]" (Aboulela, 2005b, 178). In fact, this is what Muslim conservatives often denounce, namely, that the western neo-colonizer attempts to keep the colonized perpetually busy with trivial issues so as to stop them from considering the momentous ones.

When Najwa joined a Muslim feminist community in the mosque, she changed and was finally able to free herself from a lifestyle in tune with western feminist principles. She declared, "I feel like I'm in Khartoum again. It's the atmosphere, the way people …". But then Anwar interrupted saying, "No, you haven't. You're just imagining" (Aboulela, 2005b, 180). At that moment she lacked the means to defend herself and her spiritual faith and views regarding Islam. "I didn't want to argue with him. He would win with figures and facts, his arguments well thought out. But I was following my feelings and I didn't know how to defend them" (Aboulela, 2005b, 180). It could be argued that the way Anwar is portrayed and treated in the novel, particularly as regards his political role in Sudan and

the feminist thoughts he tried to impose upon Najwa, functions as some kind of veiled attack against the West and the feminist values it advocates.

Najwa realized that she was leading a westernized life, and felt dirty, mainly on account of her extramarital relationship with Anwar, whose views on religion were “definite and he hated fundamentalists” (Aboulela, 2005b, 178). Anwar believed that it was “backward to have faith in anything supernatural; angels, djinns, Heaven, Hell, resurrection” (Aboulela, 2005b, 178). On the contrary, he admired “rationale, reason, and he could not help but despise those who needed God, needed Paradise and the fear of Hell” (Aboulela, 2005b, 178). To this Najwa retorted that “it wasn’t fundamentalists who killed [her] father, it wasn’t fundamentalists who gave [her] brother drugs”. Yet, she lacked “the words, the education or the courage” to “stand up to Anwar” (Aboulela, 2005b, 179).

It is through her criticism of Anwar that Aboulela articulates her disapproval and rejection of western feminist thoughts and the way they view and describe Arab Muslim women in their writings. Talking to herself, Najwa concluded that those fundamentalists whom Anwar condemned as “narrow-minded and bigoted” were also “tender and protective” with their wives (Aboulela, 2005b, 183), quite the contrary to him, who was clever, but was “never tender and protective” with her (Aboulela, 2005b, 183). For example, when she told him that Kamal, the friend with whom he shared the flat, had followed her to the kitchen and “pressed against [her] quickly pretending it was an accident” (Aboulela, 2005b, 178), Anwar’s only response was that the case was not even worth mentioning: “Don’t make a big thing out of it, be flexible with him, the poor guy has lots of hang-ups” (Aboulela, 2005b, 178).

Najwa is a Sudanese woman living in a foreign country, in London to be more precise. It is clear that Aboulela decided to place her main character in a land she knows quite well; she did her MA studies at the London School of Economics when she was Najwa’s age. She also settled in London with her husband for a while before moving to Aberdeen, Scotland. In almost all her fictional works, Aboulela places her heroines in foreign non-Muslim contexts, thus projecting her own experience upon them:

> I needed to express myself. I was 24 years old and stuck in a strange place, with two boisterous little boys, and my husband was working offshore on the oilrigs. It was a life for which I wasn't prepared. […]. There was the Gulf war and a lot in the papers criticizing Islam and it used to hurt me. (Sethi, 2005, par. 10)

Aboulela (2002) has often stated that she expresses herself more truly in fiction, because people in real life often "self-censor, pick and choose" and "give only snippets depending on the questioner" (199). She went on to explain: "when I write, I want to move away from myself, touch something common, universal, something that includes me but is not exclusively me"; "If I don't go away from myself, how can I produce something strange, surprising, something lifted up from the ordinary?" (Aboulela, 2002, 207). She found the right vehicle to disclose her feelings, which she was so reticent to reveal. Writing could also be regarded as her response to the global domination of western feminism, homesickness, anti-Islam biases in the media and the Gulf War.

What Najwa experienced in the West led her to articulate a critique against western politics in general and western feminists' ideologies in particular, because the latter often see themselves as the international standard after which all other feminist movements should model themselves. Aboulela expressed her disapproval of the "typical Orientalist view of Muslim women [which] pictures them as passive, oppressed, and confined to the seraglio". She strove to rectify Muslim women's distorted image as circulated in the West for at least two hundred years (Al-Hibri, 2000, 222). With her nuanced stance, Aboulela also attempted to create or build up her own Islamist feminist identity, which is essentially different from other Muslim and non-Muslim feminist ones.

4.2. The Portrayal of Muslim Woman in Aboulela's Fiction

Muslims in general, and Muslim women in particular, have often been portrayed in literature as if they were victims of a religion that they were, and still are, unable to confront. This was the stereotype that could always be found, either in writings by Westerners or by authors with Islamic backgrounds whom the West regarded as Muslims' authentic spokesmen. The works of Salman Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi and Monica Ali,

among others, were seen as offering the true image of Muslim women under the authority of Islam.

For instance, the image that Rushdie offered of Islam and the Muslim community in *The Satanic Verses* (1988) has lasted up to the present. The widespread fame that Rushdie gained on account of this novel, partly inspired by the life of Prophet Mohammed, in turn led many writers to write more freely about western Muslims as the victims of a most oppressive religion, i.e. Islam. Following Rushdie's steps, Kureishi and Ali respectively wrote their novels *The Black Album* (1995) and *Brick Lane* (2003) in an attempt to secure their reputation and prove their bravery in dealing with such controversial topics concerning Islam and Muslims.

These and other similar novels have contributed to crystallizing a negative image of Islam and Muslims, particularly in the West, and the effects of this image keep on haunting Muslims today. The fiction they wrote tended to depict Muslim immigrants, specifically those who resided in Britain, as victims of Islam and its laws, which could by no means be harmonized with the values of western society. These writers therefore asserted that Muslim immigrants needed to become more westernized, and that, without an essential renovation from within Islam and a real absorption of Muslims in the western context, they would always be deemed uncivilized. In fact, such views also explain why a great number of Muslim female writers, who dwelt in the West, felt proud to abandon their Islamic identity in order to take on a western one. The originally Somali Ayān *Ḥirsī 'Alī* and her two autobiographies, *Infidel* (2006) and *Nomad* (2010) are good examples of such an orientation.

These Muslim female writers appreciated western freedom, democracy, tolerance of diversity and the rule of law, and wanted to avoid being discriminated against in the West on account of being passive Islam followers. Muslim women's development of the aversion, concern or fear often associated with declaring a Muslim identity could be, to a great extent, the result of the fiction produced by Muslim writers who portrayed Islam as an oppressive and misogynist religion. This fiction put in its center "women's suffering, the orientalist images and stories about Islam that are inscribed in western culture" (Bosch,

2008, 144). Consequently, they promoted Islamophobia and blurred “distinctions among states, versions of Islam, and women of different cultures and classes” (Hunter, 2013, 89).

Interestingly, such texts were welcomed in the West, and their authors were regarded as authentic Muslim spokesmen, in spite of the fact that most of them were “nominal Muslims only” (Ahmed, 2003, 164). The majority of these writers also claimed to be feminists who assiduously denounced Muslim women’s misery in their respectively conservative Muslim societies. Amal Amireh (1996), for example, affirmed that the West gave these works a warm welcome because they validated the stereotypical image of Islam as misogynist, violent and backward. She also argued that the difficulties that Muslim feminist writers faced should be investigated in connection with the “complex history of their reception in the West” (par. 11). In this way, these authors attained an aura of ‘authenticity’ which, paradoxically enough, prevented them from representing the Muslim community; their works reaffirmed the western perspective on Islam rather than its reality.

In clear contrast to these writers, other Muslim women insisted on keeping their Muslim identity and follow Islamic laws just as their counterparts did in their respective homelands, although in a rather more subtle way. It is also true that, while some voluntarily decided to cling to their Islamic identity, others had this imposed on them by their guardians, and had to face up against prejudice and develop their own forms of resilience (Silvestri, 2008, 6).

Leila Aboulela’s *halal* fiction clearly represented a turning point in the way Muslims were envisaged, particularly in the West. Her novels debunked the stereotypical conceptions promoted by the aforementioned Muslim writers, who helped to distort the image of Islam and Muslims in the eyes of non-Muslims. Her fiction in general can be seen as a reaction to those who tried to satirize Islam and Muslims with their western-like perspective in order to win western approval and acceptance. She has written “from inside the experience of growing up and living with a network of customs and beliefs” (Phillips, 2005, par. 2).

Aboulela’s and other similar literary works, which started to develop only recently, have led to the emergence of a new genre of contemporary Islamist fiction written in

English, Aboulela's novels being the most important representatives of this trend. As has already been said, the purpose of such a genre has mainly been to rectify the erroneous impression that the writings of some other Muslim writers left in non-Muslim minds towards Islam and Muslims. Moreover, these works, as was stated by Phillips (2005), explored the fault lines in a variety of Islamic cultures and the life of Muslims in the West.

Aboulela's writings project her own experience and spiritual beliefs: "I have so far written close to my autobiographical situation" (Aboulela, 2007a, par. 9). Her autobiographical delineation is quite conspicuous, particularly in *Minaret*. Like Aboulela herself, Najwa, the protagonist, held onto religion in a secular environment, and felt like a stranger in an unfamiliar society, which made her yearn for her homeland, Sudan. It was mainly to cope with the difficulties that plagued her life in London that she resorted to the mosque and affiliated herself with a group of Muslim women there in order to create a sense of belonging.

Aboulela's fiction differs, to a great extent, from most of the works that other immigrant Muslim writers wrote about Islam and Muslims in the West. As regards the Sudanese Al-Tayeb Ṣāliḥ and the British Monica Ali, for example, it could be argued that Aboulela's Islam is different from Ali's, and her West is also different from Salih's. According to Sethi (2005), Aboulela contributed a rather different depiction of Islam and Muslim women: her female characters did not embrace the western lifestyle and culture, as the women in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* do. Instead, her characters pursue solace in their religious faith. In *Minaret*, neither the privileges she enjoyed in Sudan nor the westernized life she led in London could bring Najwa any happiness, tranquility and true inner peace.

> I had a happy life. My father and mother loved me and were always generous. In the summer we went for holidays in Alexandria, Geneva and London. There was nothing that I didn't have, couldn't have. No dreams corroded in rust, no buried desires. And yet, sometimes, I would remember pain like a wound that had healed, sadness like a forgotten dream. (Aboulela, 2005b, 9)

Najwa finally realized that her privileged and fancy lifestyle was not adequate to ensure a sense of self-satisfaction and serenity. More surprisingly, staying by herself in

London, Najwa voluntarily left behind the freedom sought by most women in the West. Instead, she devoted herself to following religious teachings that limited women's freedom on religious grounds. Najwa knew that, if she followed her instincts and did whatever she wanted, "no one would stop [her] or look surprised" (Aboulela, 2005b, 97). She "hesitated", but eventually decided in favour of clinging to her faith in Islam (Aboulela, 2005b, 97). She kept herself away from the temptations of secular life in London and adhered instead to the teachings of Islam as a true Muslim believer. This is how she described the feelings she experienced when she returned to Islam: "The skidding and plunging was coming to an end. Slowly, surely I was settling at the bottom. It felt oddly comfortable, painless" (Aboulela, 2005b, 181).

If compared to Al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ, the father of modern Sudanese fiction, Aboulela was fundamentally different in terms of gender, liberality and political agency. Nonetheless, their thoughts intersected in many other issues regarding Muslims, especially migrants. Both Aboulela and Ṣāliḥ are Sudanese immigrants in the West. However, although Aboulela's works, in particular *The Translator, Minaret* and the short story collection *Colored Lights*, explicitly evoke Ṣāliḥ's novels, they are significantly different in the way they deal with the main issues they portray; to give but one example, Aboulela avoided depicting the clash of civilizations, so vividly employed by Ṣāliḥ in his well-known novel *Season of Migration to the North* (1966). In her review of Aboulela's first two novels, *The Translator* and *Minaret*, Ferial Ghazoul (2001) argued that Aboulela's fiction envisaged the potentiality "to join South to North under the emblem of a universal quest, that of Islamic humanism". Ghazoul also quoted the Sudanese ambassador in London, Jamal Mohamed Ibrahim, who deemed her fiction as "a dialogue of civilizations, in contrast to Al-Tayeb Ṣāliḥ's novel […] which depicts the clash of civilizations" (as cited in Hassan, 2014, 299).

Additionally, although Ṣāliḥ wrote in Arabic and Aboulela in English, both writers preoccupied themselves with similar issues of migration, cultural perceptions and the potentiality of constructing bridges between East and West after colonization. Since Aboulela represented the younger generation, it was her responsibility to pose all the challenges that the post-colonial nation faced. Actually, she was quite ready to "take on

that challenge" (Hunter, 2013, 90). Her fiction, often seen as an outstanding contribution to "Muslim immigrant literature" (Hassan, 2014, 182), was concerned with and inspired by an immigrant Islamic perspective, which outlined the predicament of the Muslim minority in the diaspora. In her fiction, she endeavored to articulate an alternative episteme bottomed on Islam yet specifically shaped by immigrant perspectives.

The originality of this flourishing trend of Anglophone writing is that it moves away from the reactive position of writing back, the principal paradigm of postcolonial criticism. Hassan (2014) stated that Aboulela's fiction is only one example of Muslim immigrant literature, and that the authenticity of such writing "adds complexity to representations of Muslims in literature and constitutes a break from a mostly 'secular orientation' of Arabic literature" (198). On the other hand, Hassan also outlined what he perceived as the pitfalls of Muslim immigrant fiction in general and Aboulela's novels in particular. He argued that such works rejected "agency" and fell into "a reverse-Eurocentrism in its rejection of existential freedom and political responsibility […] its unreflective (or desperate) embrace of an idealized past […] [and] its apolitical nature" (198). Hassan also stated that Aboulela was no longer concerned with "failure of the national project", as she also broke with the liberating impulse seen in the movement for national independence in Sudan. Her fiction, in short, was a narrative of "redemption and fulfillment through Islam" (183).

For his part, Hunter (2013) claimed that what defined Aboulela's work was her divergent approach to recurrent issues, such as the relationship between the sacred and the secular, cultural misconceptions and stereotypes, possibilities of cultural translation, and the status of women in male-dominated societies (299). The kind of fiction that she offered was dramatically different from the contribution of other contemporary Muslim female novelists, such as the ones discussed in this dissertation, namely, Iqbalunnisa Hussain, Nawal El Saadawi and Alyia Mamdouh, whose experiences were different from hers. It seems that Aboulela's style introduced an innovative, or rather unique, way of creative construction of Islamic feminism. She approached issues of morality and ethics from religiously determined and ethnically varied ways of conduct, rather than merely secular strands (Abdullah, 2017, 158).

Sethi (2005) also stated that "Aboulela offers a very different portrayal of Muslim women in London. […] Rather than yearning to embrace western culture, Aboulela's women seek solace in their growing religious identity" (par. 4). Unlike El Saadawi and Mamdouh, who pursued a secular version of Islamic feminism similar to that of the West notwithstanding their differences, Aboulela committed herself to the Islamic faith in her works in order to contribute an Islamist feminist version that differs, to a certain degree, from other Islamic feminist positions.

The Islamic feminists whose discourse was predominantly secular were wary of any attraction to religious or cultural traditions that might go against Muslim women's welfare. However, they found themselves on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, they were aware of the spiritual beliefs to which the majority in their original communities adheres. This is why they could not openly break with the norms that were strictly followed in their homelands. On the other hand, they were aware of the importance of dealing with Muslim women as a collective and the way in which western society sees them. It is a fact that, since colonial times, Muslim women have been regarded as inferior by Westerners. Their sufferings have become even greater in the post-9/11 era, because western media often associated any manifestation of Islam with violence, irrationality and barbarity (Hunter, 2013, 90). To make matters worse, when Muslim secular feminists tried to condemn their traditions and portray Muslim women in a better way, they became vulnerable to criticism on the part of their traditional Muslim communities. They were even accused of trying to westernize Muslim society. As was previously pointed out, Nawal El Saadawi was a case in point.

Due to the fact that they were constantly accused of being funded by the West, these Muslim feminists firmly stood against applying western feminist principles upon their conservative societies. Aboulela took a further step and rejected any secular feminist thoughts; she considered the western secular version of feminism as anti-Islamic, as it mainly aims at deviating Muslim women from the real teachings of Islam (Abdullah, 2017, 156). However, this paradoxically seems to sometimes lead her to partly agree to the patriarchal Islamist interpretation of many Qur'anic verses, which recurrently refer to men's superiority over women. For instance, the concept of *Qiwamah* (men are responsible

for women's living and guardians) mentioned in the Qur'an is constantly misused to degrade women:

> Men are guardians over women because Allah has made some of them excel others, and because they (men) spend of their wealth. So virtuous women are those who are obedient, and guard the secrets of their husbands with Allah's protection. And as for those on whose part you fear disobedience, admonish them and leave them alone in their beds, and chastise them. Then if they obey you, seek not a way against them. Surely, Allah is High, Great. (Qur'an 4:34)

According to the text, men are not only women's guardians, but also their masters and rulers, entitled to discipline them when they err. Men are depicted as rational, whereas irrationality is associated with women (Eldimeshqi, 2000, 477). Muslim feminists' interpretation of this is totally different, though. Their gender-sensitive reading of the same text confirms that men should not only be responsible for providing women households, but they should also assist them in doing the household chores (Abdullah, 2017, 155).

It is undeniable that Aboulela tends to favour the patriarchal Islamist interpretation that belittles women's role and capability in social life. In *Minaret*, for instance, Najwa was offered the opportunity to drive a car, as she lived with a bourgeois family, but lacked the confidence to do so. She stated: "I wished I could feel like an emancipated young student, driving her own car with confidence", but "preferred it when Omar was with [her], when Omar was driving" (Aboulela, 2005b, 6). Islamists constantly stress that any women's social role should be conducted with the help of their guardians, and this is what Aboulela often shows in her fiction. Unlike Iqbalunnisa Hussain, Nawal El Saadawi and Alyia Mamdouh, whose resentment was mainly about the way western writers depicted Muslim women in their works, Aboulela challenged the representations offered by Westerners and feminist Muslims alike.

Aboulela refuses to portray Muslim women as victims of religion in her fiction, and to reinforce the oppressive image of the Muslim world often given by other Muslim writers. She mainly wanted to give voice to Muslim veiled women, so negatively portrayed for so long. According to Zidan (2016), Aboulela's novels are considered as eloquent vehicles to

reflect the spirit of the true Islam rather than fundamentalism. Strikingly, many may think that Leila Aboulela herself, a cultivated and veiled Muslim author, is a riposte to the portrayal of oppressed Muslim women. On the contrary, other critics believe that the way in which she tackles Muslim women's activism renders her an "Islamist" or "traditionalist" feminist (Abdullah, 2017, 155; Schneider, 2009, 56), who is not afraid to proclaim that Islam and the traditional interpretation of its texts are a "liberatory project" (Moghissi, 1999). In short, although some critics praised Aboulela's *Minaret* as "one of the most cogent attempts to communicate a life of Islamic faith in the English language novel form", others perceived it as an "apparent endorsement of submissiveness and a secondary status for women, along with its silence on some of the more thorny political issues facing Islam in the modern world" (Morey, 2018, 301).

In addition, one can fairly argue that Aboulela's interest to focus on the positive side of Islamic identity and faith in her novels have sometimes led her to turn a blind eye to some negative practices which were, and still are, imposed on Muslim women under religious pretexts. Some of these practices are female circumcision and early marriage of girls; although they are contrary to the teachings of Islam, they are widely practiced in Sudan. She has also overlooked the fact that female Muslims often live as pitiful victims. It therefore makes sense that Aboulela's fiction should be subject to some kind of scrutiny, because such issues should have also been taken into consideration in her fiction.

On the whole, Aboulela's main concern has been to describe the experience of Muslim women in the West from an Islamist feminist perspective, which, in its essence, claims that faithful women should observe obedience to the patriarchal system in order to gain its unconditional protection. This has often led her to pay little attention to the way in which Muslim women are exploited by the misuse of religion and the biased interpretations of its texts. Her profound faith has transformed all the constraints imposed by religion into positive aspects.

> Yes, Islam restrains me, but restraint is not oppression, and boundaries can be comforting and nurturing. Freedom does not necessarily bring happiness, nor does

an abundance of choices automatically mean that we will make the right one. I need guidance and wisdom; I need grace and forgiveness. (Aboulela, 2007b, par. 4)

This being said, it must also be made clear that Aboulela's invitation to adhere to religion and its teachings, especially the matters that pertain to women and what they must abide by as Muslims, differs greatly from that of fundamentalists. This difference can especially be seen in the fundamentalists' attempts to impose, not only their own interpretation of the Qur'an, but also old-time traditions that humiliate women.

When Najwa and Anwar met, they did not fear God as much as their community. Their meeting contravened the values of their conservative Muslim society, because such an act is strictly forbidden in Islam. Najwa was aware of Sudanese severe traditions, particularly with regard to encounters with someone from the other sex. This is why she and her beloved Anwar used to meet in the "Department of Science cafeteria because there were fewer people there who knew [them]" (Aboulela, 2005b, 24).

In *Minaret*, Aboulela endeavoured to subtly question the patriarchal misrepresentation of the Qur'an and other Islamic sources, and the fact that religious decrees are often based on traditions rather than true teachings of Islam. She attempted to rectify some misconceptions regarding Islam and Muslims, in particular the use of the hijab and the role the mosque can play in wiping out old binaries. In this way, she claimed that it is true Islam, rather than radical fundamentalism, that can provide immigrants with a sense of belonging, security and stability. Aboulela's *Minaret* can also be seen as a rewriting of certain religious and historical struggles resulting from the alienation of some Muslim religious schools. She has basically attempted to contribute a future form of spiritual Islam that can become a useful alternative to western secularism as the ultimate expression of civilization, and joins other Muslim novelists in rejecting the legitimization of pernicious traditions and their imposition on women as if they were part of the Islamic rules which must be strictly observed.

The major issue that brings together the Muslim feminist novelists analyzed here is their demand to reread\reinterpret both the Qur'an and Islamic history so that they can be reformulated according to the present circumstances. Only by doing this will Muslims

become free of pernicious traditions that have nothing to do with the Islam creed. In conclusion, what distinguishes Aboulela's fiction is her invitation to rethink the spiritual trend which "appears to run contrary to the secular trajectory of the English literary novel in the last 300 years" (Morey, 2018, 301).

4.2.1. Muslim Faithful Characters

As was stated before, keeping the stereotypical image of Muslim women in Muslim feminist writings maintains and reinforces the attitude of superiority of Westerners towards them. Like the works by Hussain, El Saadawi and Mamdouh, Aboulela's fiction is rife with real images from Muslim women's lives. Besides, she frequently referred to many Islamic cultural products and values. However, Aboulela's techniques and style of handling Muslim women's dilemma was different from that of other Islamic writers. Living in the West, Aboulela tried to incorporate some interaction between Islam and the West in her fiction. She delineated new-fashioned Muslim female protagonists, who rendered her novels remarkably distinguished.

In an interview, Aboulela described her fictional protagonists in her last two novels, *Minaret* (2005) and *Lyrics Alley* (2010), as Muslims with faith. In this way, she tried to distinguish them from those who are Muslims by name only. Besides, the fact that the protagonist of *Lyrics Alley* is a male makes it clear that she was interested in the depiction of both sexes. She delineated her characters in such a way that they could become the guides to fulfil her aspiration to practice the right kind of religiously. Although by no means perfect, her characters find their refuge and strength in religion rather than in doing away with it, as usually occurs in modern literary works. Furthermore, almost all her female protagonists embody a distinct Muslim identity, rather more fervent and firmer than that of many women in Muslim communities of the East. It is also obvious that her protagonists have the power to make themselves according to their own beliefs (BBC, 2009). Probably, this is why some British critics argued that Leila Aboulela has the capacity to introduce a different image of Muslim women through her heroines.

Although they are usually troubled, Aboulela's characters are fairly dynamic. Muslim faithful characters in *Minaret* are depicted as normal people with their own positive and negative traits. None of them is completely righteous or immoral. In this novel,

Aboulela did not attribute to her protagonist Najwa all the characteristics that an observant Muslim should have. Although she is the leading character and the only narrator, she makes her own mistakes. In a way, it was Shahinaz's disapproving response to the deep affection that Najwa had for Tamer that mainly reinforced the Islamist feminist thoughts that Aboulela wanted to put forward in *Minaret*, very much in tune with the interpretation of the Qur'anic text that affirms that a man is the guardian of his first-degree female relatives: "Men are guardians over women" (Qur'an 4:34).

Shahinaz reprimanded Najwa for her unhealthy inclination and her feelings towards Tamer, and was shocked by the way Najwa thought: "I can't believe you're saying this. No one in their right mind wants to be a slave" (Aboulela, 2005b, 157). Shahinaz also objected to Najwa and Tamer's union because Tamer was so much younger than she. However, Islam does not prohibit a man from marrying a woman older than him. The Prophet Mohammed himself married a woman fifteen years his senior; it is the extraneous traditions of Islam that alone forbade such a marriage, which once again brings to light the fact that it is the power of traditions rather than religion that often rules Muslims' lives.

As a young girl, Najwa dreamed of marrying a rich man, living in a big house with servants and traveling abroad (Aboulela, 2005b, 25). If the military coup in Sudan had not turned her life upside down, she would have possibly compromised on the sort of life that her mother led and envisaged for her. Unlike her Sudanese friend, Randa, who was admitted into the University of Wales, Najwa was only admitted in Khartoum University, and this with great difficulty. She never had plans for further studies or carrying out a particular career. Najwa recalled her days in Khartoum University as follows:

> Once a long time ago in Khartoum University, I struggled with these subjects. I was in university to kill time until I got married and had children. I thought that was why all the girls were there too but they surprised me by caring about their education, forging ahead with jobs and careers. I surprised myself by never getting married. (Aboulela, 2005b, 73)

It is in London that Najwa is for the first time introduced as an ordinary person who has to face life with its ups and downs. She seems to be totally detached from her inner

world. In some situations, she acts as if she were a mere spectator watching her own life. Perhaps the most emotionally-charged psychological situation can be found in Najwa's talk about her relationship with religion and her desire to perform Hajj, which would purify her soul and sweep away all her sins. Nonetheless, she fulfils her desire to perform Hajj in a manner that is contrary to the principles of Islam and its teachings: when she is under the pressure of Tamer's family, she gives him up to allow him to preserve his relationship with his mother. However, she does so in return of a sum of money, which will allow her to go to Mecca and perform the Hajj with which she will free herself of her sins.

As a matter of fact, neither Najwa nor her relatives were religious, even though they lived in a conservative society dominated by Islamic traditions and customs. "We weren't brought up in a religious way, neither of us. We weren't even friends in Khartoum with people who were religious", "[o]ur house was a house where only the servants prayed", Najwa says to her brother Omer (Aboulela, 2005b, 68). It will take her some time to change her behavior, even after her religious reawakening, which is first described as her escape from the present moment, rather than her mature choice.

Najwa will eventually accept the lessons she receives at the mosque religious school, and will also agree to what Tamer told her about the lectures of Amr Khaled, an Egyptian televangelist who achieved global fame with his message of religious tolerance and dialogue with the West. At first Najwa does not seem to be much concerned with metaphysical questions as regards the interpretations of Islamic teachings and laws. Furthermore, she chooses to find the answers she needs via community affiliation rather than claiming her individuality, as was the case of Firdaus, Nawal El Saadawi's heroine.

Najwa grew up in a family of Anglophiles. She went to the American club and "dreamt dreams shaped by pop songs and American films" (Aboulela, 2005b, 26). Yet, she was always affected by "the sound of the azan" and how it "went inside [her]" (Aboulela, 2005b, 22). She affirmed that the azan "passed through the smell in the car, it passed through the fun I had had at the disco and it went to a place I didn't know existed. A hollow place. A darkness that would suck me in and finish me" (Aboulela, 2005b, 22). She frequently experienced such feelings when she heard the call for prayer: "I could hear the

azan. It went on and on and now, from far away, I could hear another mosque echoing the words, tapping at the sluggishness in me, nudging at a hidden numbness, like when my feet went to sleep and I touched them" (Aboulela, 2005b, 22). This is how she expresses her submissiveness to its sound and God's words:

> Whenever I heard the azan in Khartoum, whenever I heard the Qur'an recited I would feel a bleakness in me and a depth and space would open up, hollow and numb. I usually didn't notice it, wasn't aware that it existed. Then the Qur'an heard by chance on the radio of a taxi would tap at this inner sluggishness, nudge it like when my feet went to sleep and I touched them. They felt fat and for them to get back to normal, for me to be able to move my toes again, they would have to first crunch with pins and needles. (Aboulela, 2005b, 97)

These excerpts foreshadow Najwa's religious conversion and how the voice of Islam will comfort her after having gone through extremely tough days, tinged with loss, disappointment, insecurity, anxiety and confusion. Muslim clerics usually claim that the truth of Islam must be heard, and that believers should respond to the call, i.e. the azan. According to Pooyan Tamimi Arab (2017), having faith means "adhering to the truth of the call" (21). This truth, in turn, means the "trust or submission, of being true to the call" (21). Arab (2017) also argued that the azan, which is the Islamic call to prayer, is a "practical way of calling believers, but it can also be understood as a spiritual metaphor for the turn and change in orientation that takes place in the believer's soul" (21).

Additionally, the azan is a highly pivotal and evocative symbol of the Islamic faith. It calls out to Muslims and reminds them to turn to God. This is precisely what happens to Najwa. When she was told that she should pray for her mother and recite some Qur'anic texts for her soul to rest in peace, she "felt that same bleakness in [her]". She "became aware of that hollow place. Perhaps that was where the longing for God was supposed to come from and [she] didn't really have it" yet (Aboulela, 2005b, 97). Najwa's potential spirituality undoubtedly predisposed her to practice Islam. She recalled her life in Sudan when she was a university student, "At sunset I would sit and watch them praying. They held me still with their slow movements, the recitation of the Qur'an. I envied them

something I didn't have but I didn't know what it was. I didn't have a name for it" (Aboulela, 2005b, 97). Najwa was unconsciously inclined to practice a true Islamic faith, although her friends "often joked about how westernized [she] was, detached from Sudanese Islamic traditions" (Aboulela, 2005b, 170). In spite of her privileged life and aristocratic family, she was yearning for something "like a forgotten dream" (Aboulela, 2005b, 9).

Furthermore, Najwa instinctively admired the modest Islamic dress, which supposedly hides the charms of a woman's body and prevents her from being regarded as a commodity. Although she wore "too short skirts and too tight blouses", she admired the decent clothes worn by two provincial girls at the university (Aboulela, 2005b, 9). She was conscious of "their modest grace, of the tobes[2] that covered their slimness - *pure white* cotton covering their arms and hair" (Aboulela, 2005b, 9; emphasis added). Such reactions already point to Najwa's latent inclination to become a devout Muslim.

The most devout characters in the novel, apart from Najwa, are her young lover, Tamer, and her close friend, Shahinaz. They are also described as very normal people with their own defects and merits. Najwa described Tamer as "so devout and good. No cigarettes, no girlfriend, no clubbing, no drinking. He has a beard and goes to the mosque every day" (Aboulela, 2005b, 66). In contrast, she disapproved of his behavior "when he [was] harsh about his parents" (Aboulela, 2005b, 66, 153). He was also "a common rebellious teenager […] dreamy, immature, inexperienced and almost spoiled youth" (Aboulela, 2005b, 188). He dreamed of going back in time to the days of "horses and tents, swords, and raids" (Aboulela, 2005b, 189). It seems as if he were trying to replicate the marriage of the twenty-five-year Prophet Mohammed with his first forty-year wife, Khadija bint Khuwaylid.

Najwa's devout Muslim friend Shahinaz is shown as another Muslim figure with some mixed feelings. She "changes when she closes the front door behind her, when she takes off her coat and pulls off her headscarf" (Aboulela, 2005b, 175). Moreover, she sometimes "envies" Najwa and her other friends on account of the freedom they enjoy

[2]*tobe* is a long and loose costume worn by Sudanese Muslim females.

(Aboulela, 2005b, 158). Last but not least, doing the household chores, rearing children and looking after her husband and his mother were some of the things Shahinaz was fed up with, precisely the activities that should be seen as priorities by a devout Muslim wife.

As to the other non-believing characters, namely, Najwa's brother Omer, her boyfriend Anwar and Tamer's sister, Lamya, Aboulela did not attribute them any positive characteristics. This might lead some readers to have a point when criticizing the author for making her secular characters unable to accomplish their goals in life. On the contrary, Tamer and Shahinaz, her conservative Muslim characters, manage to succeed in pursuing their university studies and heading towards a successful future respectively. This being said, it is also true that the superiority of spiritually faithful Muslims over secular Muslims is never taken quite seriously in the novel. After all, Najwa is first introduced as weak, ambivalent, apathetic and socially insensitive, while Tamer is depicted as an immature spoiled young dreamer. By outlining her characters in this way, Aboulela might have attempted to shift the emphasis from imperfect Muslims to spiritual believers and, even more important, to make it clear that both Muslims and non-Muslims are nothing but ordinary human beings.

4.2.2. Najwa's Religious Re-awakening in a Non-Religious Context

As was stated by Sophie Gilliat-Ray (1999), transformation or conversion is a "difficult phenomenon to account for. Sometimes it is a sharp, clear break between the past and a new future, but often it is not" (315). I am not going to make the argument even more complicated by digging into the detailed reasons and motives behind this phenomenon. I will simply affirm that this process can become even more convoluted when trying to strengthening ties with Islam in such a different environment as the West. As stated by Will Herberg (1983), "the quest for a recovery of meaning in life [and] the new search for inwardness and personal authenticity amid collectivistic heteronomies of the present-day world" appear to be immediate consequences of the "collapse of all secular securities in the historical crisis of our time" (257). On the other hand, in her book *British Muslim Converts: Choosing Alternative Lives*, Kate Zebiri (2014) maintained that the element of crisis "has more to do with personal and emotional rather than social matters" (54). She also argued that against the hypothesis that crises become the element that mainly catalyzes

conversion or reversion, other similar studies show that crises do not appear to be decidedly relevant in the case of Muslim converts (54). It is “cognitive factors” rather than “life crises” that become catalysts for reversion/ conversion (Zebiri, 2014, 54).

As regards Najwa’s transformation, it was a spiritual reawakening rather than a religious one. In this context, spirituality and religiosity are considered to mean different things. Spirituality is concerned with an individual practice, performed when there is a sense of peace and purpose. However, religiosity means following a set of beliefs and practices usually shared by a community or group of people. For many, spiritualism, which is more concerned with individualism, is sometimes contrary to religion. Such a thesis may justify Najwa’s irreligious deeds, particularly her relationships with Anwar and Tamer, which apparently contradict Islam and its teachings.

Despite the fact that all religions consider spirituality as a quintessential ingredient of faith, one can be spiritual without being religious. Such tension recurs in Aboulela’s fiction, mainly intended to shift the focus to spirituality in order to establish a connection between individuals and the Creator. In his reading of *Minaret*, Geoffrey Nash (2007) concluded that it was the non-Muslim context, in which *Shari’a* (Islamic laws) was neither imposed by the state nor by social traditions, that encouraged Najwa to make her own decision. She chose to be a pious Muslim with her own views, different from those of traditional and fundamentalist Muslims. Although she lived freely in London, Najwa decided to do away with her westernized lifestyle to embrace a spiritual Islamic faith which differs, to some degree, from fundamentalism, because it places the self at the heart of a “religiosity disconnected from ethnicity and culture” (Nash, 2007, 145). In his book *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*, Olivier Roy (2004) also described the personal religious reawakening as the attaining of a faith that puts the “self and hence the individual” at the core of religiosity. For Roy, “faith is personal, faith is the truth. Faith is not religion” (31).

Another possible interpretation for Najwa’s religious reawakening is the misery, afflictions, deception, and cruelty that she suffered. Being geographically exiled, economically destitute and, above all, extremely lonely in London, Najwa had no other

option but to resort to Islam and affiliate herself to the transnational Islamic community formed at Regent's Park mosque in London. Najwa had undergone a number of crises before, in particular when the coup seized power in Sudan: her family displacement, the premature death of her mother, her brother's addiction to drugs and subsequent imprisonment, her loneliness, losing her virginity, and her deteriorated economic situation, to mention but some, affected her life drastically, eventually forcing her to seek refuge in religion. She became aware that life crises were the inevitable punishment for her family's transgressions. When talking to Omar in jail, Najwa affirms, "If Baba and Mama had prayed […] if you and I had prayed, all of this wouldn't have happened to us. 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" (Aboulela, 2005b, 68).

As was argued before, after all the luxury she enjoyed and her family's "succession of Ethiopian maids [and] houseboys", Najwa ended up working as a maid for an Arab family in London (Aboulela, 2005b, 60). The "servant role" she was slotted in did not take her "by surprise", though, as she had been quite used to having servants in her past life (Aboulela, 2005b, 60). On her very first day as a maid, she recalls, "memories rushed back at me. All the ingratiating manners, the downcast eyes, the sideway movements of the servants I grew up with. I used to take them for granted". And goes on to add: "I didn't know a lot of them– our succession of Ethiopian maids, houseboys, our gardener–but I must have been close to them, absorbing their ways, so that now, years later and in another continent, I am one of them" (Aboulela, 2005b, 60).

Najwa's religious revival or reawakening comes into being only after her traumatic fall. Moreover, even then, her behaviour sometimes contravenes Islam and its principles. Najwa longed to be a part of a family at all costs, which contradicted the very essential principles that Islamic feminism advocates, namely, Muslim women's equality and dignity. On the other hand, although Islamist feminism often calls for protecting and supporting women in return for their unquestioned conformity and obedience to patriarchy (Badran, 2007, 13), it never approves that a Muslim believing woman should descend into the position of a concubine, a position that Najwa accepts for herself in order to remain in Tamer's family. At one point in the novel she exclaims: "I wish we were living centuries

ago and, instead of just working for Tamer's family, I would be their slave" (Aboulela, 2005b, 157). She goes as far as to assert: "I would like to be his family's concubine, like something out of *The Arabian Nights* [more properly known as *The Thousand and One Nights*], with life-long security and a sense of belonging" (Aboulela, 2005b, 157). When disclosing to Shahinaz her attraction towards a man nineteen years her junior, Najwa receives a stern rebuke from her friend: "when I think of a man I admire, he would have to know more than me, be older than me. Otherwise I wouldn't be able to look up to him. And you can't marry a man you don't look up to. Otherwise how can you listen to him or let him guide you?" (Aboulela, 2005b, 157). Gender equality is totally out of the question. Shahinaz's rebuke renders Najwa unable to respond, "I don't have anything to say. I stare down at my hands, my warped self and distorted desires" (Aboulela, 2005b, 157).

Najwa only longs to have a family: "I enjoy being in a home rather than cleaning offices and hotels. I like being part of a family, touching their things, knowing what they ate, what they threw in the bin" (Aboulela, 2005b, 60). She wanted to know the people she worked for in "intimate ways", although they "hardly" knew her, as if she were "invisible" (Aboulela, 2005b, 60). Najwa's fantasies about being "his family's concubine", together with her attachment to her work, raises questions as to whether her faith, instead of subverting patriarchal dictates, contributes to preserving the patriarchal order. Although some readers may find Najwa irrational when feeling this way, her strong desire to belong to a family was not, as I see it, the outcome of her religious reawakening, but rather the result of her individual desire. Sometimes it is difficult to come to terms with Najwa's contradictory actions. On the one hand, she was aware that she had to "settle for freedom in this modern time" as a single woman living in a western society (Aboulela, 2005b, 158). On the other, she involves herself in a fruitless relationship with a man who is half her age. In addition, the way she fantasized about being enslaved as a concubine in Tamer's house contradicted traditional and religious values. Bearing in mind that she is a Muslim believing woman, Najwa's inclination for slavery appears to be very preposterous. Hassan (2008) argued that Aboulela's protagonist showed preference for being in bondage "in an idealized fantasy of the past, over a reductive notion of freedom as a modern invention" (315). Such a preference, Hassan goes on to argue, can only be explained by "her situation as a veiled Muslim woman in Britain, isolated and constantly bombarded by hostile

representations of her religion as oppressive" (2008, 315). He also believed that, since "freedom" is routed in "Eurocentric discourse" and is seen as an exclusive western privilege, Najwa thought of it as an "empty space" that lacked "life-long security and a sense of belonging" (Aboulela, 2005b, 158). The sense of belonging that could only be ensured by the "jealous and sometimes violent protectiveness" of males that she desperately needed in London (Hassan, 2008, 315).

On the other hand, the fact that Najwa described freedom as an "empty space" should not necessarily be interpreted as a critique of the western lifestyle (Aboulela, 2005b, 127). Being in her late thirties, Najwa experiences the loneliness of a single person that has no family responsibilities. Shahinaz's envy of her free friends, who have no obligations as wives, mothers and daughters-in-law also renders freedom quite desirable. Furthermore, Shahinaz's envy should not necessarily be the result of oppressive practices imposed on Muslim wives. It can simply be her reaction to the stress usually found in family life. Eve Alexandra, for her part, stated that Najwa's religious reawakening is not a personal religious quest, but rather her wish to shrink responsibility in order to escape psychological stress (Alexandra, 2006). According to this critic, Najwa did not come to the right decision when she chose religious reversion. She did so because she had no other choice. Judging from all this, it is obvious that it is by no means easy to reach simple and straightforward conclusions. It is probably the difficulty of pinning down the experience of Najwa's conversion that generates such confusion on the part of those who have never undergone such an experience.

To rely on Mike Phillips's words (2005), Aboulela took a real risk to author a narrative of such "complex reversals". However, she "succeeds brilliantly", as *Minaret* is a "beautiful, daring, challenging novel" (par. 9). According to this critic, Najwa's spiritual reawakening does not mean that she surrendered to traditions. It is rather a "hard-won" devotion to service and a form of compensation for her traumatic past. The real challenge Aboulela has taken up, as I see it is, thus, to communicate an experience of Islamic faith to an Anglophone non-Muslim reader.

4.3. Aboulela's Moderate Islamist Identity

Towards the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, Muslim identity became an issue in the West. Individuals, communities, nations and cultures took on Muslim identity as their only signifier. In his report, Humayun Ansari wrote that, despite the fact that "British Muslims are now more sensitive to the existence of differences between Muslims in terms of how they lead their lives and practice Islam", they "assert the continued relevance of the Muslim *umma* (nation) and its concerns in their lives" (2002, 32). Muslims in the West also affirm that "Islam as opposed to ethnicity […] plays the most important part in their lives" (14). It seems that Muslims were in need of an inclusive identity, which could empower them and helped them become part of a potentially powerful community.

According to Mariam Khan (2019), "belonging is a human need" (45). It is an instinct that makes individuals yearn to be a part of, or at least be accepted by a community. For Muslims residing in the West, a sense of belonging was quintessential, as they found themselves ostracized with nowhere they could call home. After the events of September 11th, Muslims were often subjected to harassment and violence. They were neither welcomed to live in the West nor could they go back to their homelands strongly steeped in disarray. This, in turn, increased their yearning for the sense of belonging with which they could identify. On the other hand, many Muslims spared no effort to be accepted in the West.

Muslim writers in the diaspora no doubt contributed to bringing such endeavours to the fore. It is clear that religious identity has an undeniable influence on their literary products. In some cases, religious identity does not only interfere with the literary work, but it sometimes produces it. Aboulela's *Minaret* is a case in point. In this novel, Aboulela depicted Islam as a global religion, which transcends national identity to attract Muslims from divergent cultures, races, classes and nationalities. The protagonist, Najwa, is Sudanese. Her close friend, Shahinaz, is Pakistani. Wafaa, who washed the corpse of Najwa's mother, is Egyptian, while her husband is a blond Englishman. The Qur'an teacher in the mosque, Um Waleed, is Syrian. In addition to these characters, there are other Muslims from Britain, India, Malaysia and Iran. Each of these nationalities has its own

costumes and culture. However, all of them come under the umbrella of Islam. No matter their differences, they are all Muslims, regardless of their class, race and geographical background. To give but one example, Najwa, who worked as a maid, and the wife of the Senegalese Ambassador, are linked by the same religion.

In *Minaret*, Aboulela endeavoured to portray Islam as a source of inspiration for all Muslims. Throughout the novel, the reader comes across a variety of well-known Muslim countries, movements and figures: “Sudan”, “Egypt”, “Iraq”, “*Eritrea”,* “Palestine”, “Iran”, “Amr Khalid”, “Saddam Hussain”, “Khomeini”, “Hizbullah” and “the Muslim Brotherhood”, among others. All of them come together, in spite of the fact that Islam has so many divisions, particularly the main two Muslim sects, Sunni and Shiʿa (Ali, 2019, 4). It seems that Aboulela’s message is that real Islam is a global system that accepts all differences under its umbrella. It can harmoniously coexist with other religions and cultures as well. The novel also provides a new image of Islam and Muslims, intended for non-Muslims especially. Tamer’s character, for instance, contradicts the stereotypical fundamentalist image, which eventually led to the clash between Islam and the West. Although he is introduced as a Muslim conservative man, he shows a good relation with western society. His identity has been shaped by both Islam and western culture. However, Tamer is by no means idealized. He occasionally argues with his mother and sister about some religious issues, particularly because Lamya, his older sister, is non-observant and leads a very westernized life. However, he never takes part in any Islamic activities that threaten the West. Actually, Muslims were allowed to practice their religious rituals with complete freedom In London, which shows that they were somehow accepted. The novel’s ultimate message is that real Muslims do not reject the West nor its culture; Islam, in its essence, calls for the peaceful coexistence and acceptance of all people, regardless of any identity with which they could identify.

Tamer was “devout” and conservative, and went “to the mosque every day” (Aboulela, 2005b, 66). Unlike fundamentalists, who are constantly accused of oppressing women, Tamer treated Najwa tenderly. In spite of being a university student of a wealthy family, he never looked down upon her. Their love affair was marked with mutual respect because the Islamic principles they believed in diluted all differences. It was Islam that

bridged the gap between them. Najwa found in Tamer what she could not find in Anwar, although Najwa and Anwar were of the same age and had known each other since they were students in Khartoum University. Paradoxically enough, Anwar constantly pretended that he was a philogynist who, unlike Islamists, adopts western feminist attitudes when dealing with women. Najwa desperately needed someone who could ease her traumatic life. As she told Tamer: "There was a time when I had craved pity, needed it but never got it. And there are nights when I want nothing else but someone to stroke my hair and feel sorry for me" (Aboulela, 2005b, 85).

Tamer also trusted Najwa and appreciated her religiosity. He was the only one who comforted her when she was humiliated, blamed or scolded by his sister, Lamya. He took care of Najwa and played the role of her protector, as good male Muslims are supposed to do according to the Qur'an (Qur'an 4:34). Similarly, Najwa rejected her Arab and Sudanese identity in exchange for her adherence to her identity as a Muslim woman. Inspired by her religious reawakening, she was proud enough to announce herself as a Muslim. Giving everything up and holding on to religion was also her attempt to forget everything that reminded her of her traumatic past. Instead, her faith in Islam was always there to empower her to cope with all her difficulties.

4.3.1. Najwa's Traumatic Past and Identity Crisis

According to the American Psychological Association (APA), any person may experience trauma as a response to any event they find emotionally or physically harmful and threatening. Traumatized people are those who can feel a range of emotions, whether immediately after the event and/or in the long term. They may feel shocked, helpless, overwhelmed, or have difficulties in processing their experiences (APA, 2021, par. 3). One of the most common strategies to cope with trauma is avoidance and/or escapism. As stated by Saumya Kalia (2021), escapism is a way to cope with stress. In psychology, escapism is generally defined as a desire or behaviour to ignore, evade, or avoid reality. It is a mental diversion caused by unpleasant or unbearable aspects of daily life. Escapism may also be used to free one's self from persistent feelings of depression or general sadness (Kalia, par. 5-6). Freud (1973) argued that a quota of escapist fantasy is a necessary element in humans' lives, and supported his views quoting Theodor Fontane, who believed that people

"cannot subsist on the scanty satisfaction they can extort from reality. [People] simply cannot do without auxiliary constructions" (419). Traumatized individuals naturally avoid people, places, memories and, above all, situations that are associated with traumatic events. Taking on a new identity and escaping one's past can play a significant role in working through trauma.

Najwa's narrative teems with threatening and traumatic events. As was said before, in Sudan she lived an easy and westernized life. However, when Najwa was nineteen a military coup seized power in her country and forced her and her family to leave everything behind and seek refuge in London. Shortly after reaching this city, her father was executed and all their money was confiscated. As a result, her life deteriorated at all levels. Like Aboulela, Najwa began to see London differently and anxiety began to creep into her. Both of them bore the brunt of moving from a familiar eastern Muslim context to an uncommon western secular one. It was very challenging to adjust in this new kind of residence. As Aboulela confessed: "I moved from heat to cold, from the Third World to the First – I adjusted, got used to the change over time. But in coming to Scotland, I also moved from a religious Muslim culture to a secular one and that move was the most disturbing of all, the trauma that no amount of time could cure, an eternal culture shock" (Chambers, 2009, 87).

When Anwar was also forced to leave Sudan and resort to London because of his political opinions, he met Najwa there and they got back together. Their relationship developed because London provided them with a freedom they had never experienced before. Najwa put it like this: "[Anwar] put his arm around me because we were not in Khartoum, because we were in Hyde Park and the few people who walked past didn't stare. They didn't care what we were doing and would not have been surprised" (Aboulela, 2005b, 120). Experiencing absolute freedom, Najwa forgets about the strict traditions she used to observe in Sudan, "We were free. I could not yet get over that. Freedom enthralled me when I was with him" (Aboulela, 2005b, 120). To liberate herself from the restrictions imposed by her religion, traditions and culture, she took on a new western identity by considering herself a "true Londoner". This new identity, in turn, pushed her to satisfy her worldly desires. She thought that embracing a western identity would enable her to do

whatever she desired without being criticized by society. Leading such a westernized life in London, Najwa lost her virginity in her extramarital relationship with Anwar. The pain she experienced after losing her virginity only contributed to intensifying her trauma even more. Anwar, for his part, tried to ease her sense of remorse by saying: "like every other Arab girl […] you've been brainwashed about the importance of virginity" (Aboulela, 2005b, 127); "I know you're westernized, I know you're modern […] that's what I like about you - your independence" (Aboulela, 2005b, 171-172). He went on to justify her conduct by asking: "how many twenty-five-year-old girls in London are virgins?" (Aboulela, 2005b, 128). He tried to convince her that there was nothing wrong with what she had done, and explained that her feelings of remorse and regret were only caused by her internalization of patriarchal ideologies and thoughts (Alsop et al. 2002), which she must do her best to dismiss.

In addition, Burke and Stets (2009) stated that, under certain circumstances, people make "decisions not on the basis of rationality, but perhaps on the bases of self-interest, fear, love, cowardice or some combination of these other motives" (6). In keeping with this, Najwa's decision to surrender to Anwar's sexual desire might have been taken because of fear. It might also be caused by her desperate need to be loved and get over her traumatic past. Whatever the reason, Najwa became obsessed with her sins, in particular losing her virginity. She admitted that she had "given in to" Anwar, but had been "wrong", and her sense of guilt "never ever went away" (Aboulela, 2005b, 178).

Najwa resorted to the mosque in search of "a wash", "a purge", "a restoration of innocence", and above all a new religious identity with which she could escape her past (Aboulela, 2005b, 178). She "yearned to go back to being safe with God" (Aboulela, 2005b, p. 178). Moreover, living in a western non-Muslim society further intensified her sense of inferiority and exacerbated her trauma sequelae. She identified with the "caged foreign animals" which "weighed [her] down", and realized that only the company of Muslim people could smooth her suffering. Najwa ultimately found the comfort and solace absent in the western society in the Muslim women's community at Regent's Park mosque. She also distanced herself from her secular boyfriend, Anwar, and did her best to be close to Tamer: "only Tamer's company […] made the outing pleasant" (Aboulela, 2005b, 142).

If, according to Sadia Abbas (2011), “Islam provides comfort, community, and access to identity” (445), then Najwa’s recourse to the mosque and her yearning to belong in a Muslim community was her attempt to take on a new identity. An identity that could provide her with security and power, that could help her work through her previous traumatic experiences. Just as Najwa abandoned her Sudanese identity to escape her disgraced past, she claimed her Islamic identity to escape her sinful and traumatic life.

Najwa was the daughter of an important official in the Sudanese government, who was executed for “embezzle[ment]” and “corruption” (Aboulela, 2005b, 27, 68). She was always afraid that any Sudanese person who knew her past might recognize her. When she realizes that the family she works for was originally from Sudan, her “heart starts to pound as it always does when there is the threat that someone will know who [she is], who [she] was, what [she has] become” (Aboulela, 2005b, 50). Many times she lied and said that she was “Eritrean or Somali” when being asked about her country. According to Mercer (2013), “identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty” (259). Fearing that someone might recognize her, she remains trapped and haunted by her past: “I circle back, I regress; the past doesn’t let go. It might as well be a malfunction, a scene repeating itself, a scratched vinyl record, a stutter” (Aboulela, 2005b, 158). At another point in the novel, Najwa blurted out: “I’m afraid, […] that what happened in Khartoum will always affect us”. She was constantly worried that her past might be revealed: “It was not really what happened, but who I was, whose daughter I was?” (Aboulela, 2005b, 114). She searched for the right words because she did not want to mention her father and “risk becoming teary” (Aboulela, 2005b, 114). Anwar then interrupted her saying, “look […] here no one knows our background, no one knows whose daughter you are, no one knows my politics. We are both niggers, equals” (Aboulela, 2005b, 114). Being ‘niggers’ in Britain paradoxically freed Najwa and Anwar from their Islamic Sudanese identity, most unwelcomed in the West, particularly after 9/11, 2001. So far Najwa had received nothing but bullying and contempt from non-Muslims. As she walked down Gloucester Road she pondered:

> Whatever happened to me, whatever happened in the world, London remained the same, constant; continuous underground trains, the newsagents selling Cadbury's chocolates, the hurried footsteps of people leaving work. That was why we were here: governments fell and coups were staged and that was why we were here. For the first time in my life, I disliked London and envied the English, so unperturbed and grounded, never displaced, never confused. For the first time, I was conscious of my shitty-coloured skin next to their placid paleness. (Aboulela, 2005b, 127)

She reached the conclusion that she would never be admitted to the community, that her pain of unbelonging would never subside.

4.3.2. Transnational Identity of Aboulela's Spiritual Faith

Since the publication of her debut and widely circulated novel, *The Translator*, Aboulela has become known for her *halal* fiction, which has the imperatives of belief at its centre. In *Minaret*, her second novel, she criticized the normative materialist and secularist individualism against which proactive Islamic faith was seen as "peculiar, aberrant, and incomprehensible" (Morey, 2018, 302). Thus, it can be argued that, through *Minaret*, Aboulela wanted to publish a compromising Muslim text that could offer in-depth knowledge about Islam to non-Muslims.

Aboulela's fiction is not merely a fiction written by a Muslim writer with an Islamic inclination, as might be perceived by some. It rather centers on the writer's inner motivations of faith and sense of identity. In *Minaret*, Aboulela introduces a character which has at its core religion, or rather its reawakening, as the main means to articulate her own feelings about Islam. For Aboulela's protagonist, Najwa, Islam is a peaceful source of sustenance and guidance. She supplicated to God: "My Lord, You are the One who created us, You are the One who guides us, You are the One who feeds us and when we fall ill You are the One who cures us" (Aboulela, 2005b, 153). As a matter of fact, Aboulela has tried to portray the world through the eyes of a Muslim believer in almost all of her writings (see Eissa, 2005). In both *The Translator* and *Minaret*, her heroines are "explicitly Islamic" (Stotesbury, 2009, 245). Her fiction basically portrays personal, deep and firm religious convictions, and has often debunked the vision that Westerners have of Muslim women and their struggle to belong.

In his reading of Aboulela's novels, John Stotesbury (2009) maintained that both *The Translator* and *Minaret* argue for a stance on Islam that "denies the ultimate significance of the notion of geophysical, urban neighbourhood" to replace it with an "absolute adherence to an alternative, definable, but also invisible and borderless 'neighbourhood': Islam" (245). Aboulela's fiction thus strives to re-define Islam as an unlimited global or universal institution. As was stated by Rae, the male protagonist who converted to Islam in *The Translator*, "Ours isn't a religion of suffering […] nor is it tied to a particular place" (Aboulela, 2015, 179). It rather enhances placeless Islamic devotion.

For Aboulela, life is a temporary and fleeting journey, which is going to end up soon. She believes that, in such a journey, a "personal, religious identity provides more stability than national identity" (Sethi, 2005, par. 9). She also affirmed: "I can carry [religion] with me wherever I go, whereas the other things can easily be taken away from me (Sethi, 2005, par. 9). Religion could thus provide Aboulela with what Hassan (2008) called "supra-national and multi-ethnic Islamic identity" (315). When Najwa asked her young lover, Tamer, whether he felt Sudanese or not, he shrugged and then answered, "My mother is Egyptian. I've lived everywhere except Sudan: in Oman, Cairo, here. My education is western and that makes me feel that I am western. My English is stronger than my Arabic", to then surmise, "I guess being a Muslim is my identity" (Aboulela, 2005b, 79). In a like manner, when Tamer asked Najwa if she considered herself a Sudanese, she pointed out: "I feel that I am Sudanese but things changed for me when I left Khartoum. Then even while living here in London, I've changed". She finally said, "like you, I just think of myself as a Muslim". In contrast Lamya, Tamer's non-practicing sister, "considers herself Arab" (Aboulela, 2005b, 79).

Although Najwa and Tamer's experiences of displacement are divergent, i.e. Najwa is a refugee and Tamer is an extensively travelled international student, it was the universality of Islam rather than their nationality that became the key defining element of their identities. They held on to their religious identity in order to give expression to their Islamic spiritual faith in a cosmopolitan city like London. Najwa and Tamer's viewpoint of Islam seem consistent with the views of the author, who believes that religious identity

is more important than the national one. Unlike religious identity, national identity cannot be carried everywhere.

Despite her upholding of a transnational Muslim identity, Aboulela also called attention to the memory of local, African and distinctively Khartoumian experiences, though. She considered such a heritage pivotal so that her female characters could understand themselves within a non-Muslim and multicultural context. Stating her inability to understand herself, Najwa asserts, “I become fragmented and deflated in discussions; I never know which point of view I support. I find myself agreeing with whoever is speaking or with the one I like best” (Aboulela, 2005b, 56). Lacking a clearly defined identity in an unfamiliar society, Najwa felt lost. Besides, having no clear outlook of her existence in the West afflicted her with painful memories: “sometimes, I would remember pain like a wound that had healed”(Aboulela, 2005b, 9). She was yearning for an identity that could allow her to be accepted wherever she lived. Or rather an international identity that might ensure her a decent life in a non-Muslim environment. In this way, Aboulela advises and reminds immigrant Muslims that they should not abandon the traditions that inform their religion. It is possible for immigrants to change their lifestyle, but they cannot change their religion or act against its rules if they happen to be true believers. In this sense, Aboulela has played the role of a preacher whose main concern is the welfare of Muslims living in the diaspora.

4.3.3. Hijab as Muslim Woman’s Badge

Despite the fact that observing the hijab can be seen as the Muslim woman’s badge, it could in turn be considered to be a means of protection and avoidance of harassment. Similarly, as was explained in Chapter two, observation of the veil before and after the advent of Islam was a form of protecting free women from men’s promiscuity. According to Lindsey Moore (2008), a rather more positive interpretation could be given: wearing hijab might also be regarded as a way of “asserting privacy, and rejecting constructions of the female as body” (137).

In Aboulela’s *Minaret*, Najwa’s choice to wear hijab can be viewed as her reclamation of an Islamic identity and her strategy to make up for the alienation she experienced in a non-Muslim society. For Moore (2008), who relied on Homi Bhabha’s

sociolinguistic theory of identity and community (55), Najwa's choice to wear hijab was an "alternative to a 'third space' existence in Europe" (137). As is well known, Bhabha's 'third space' refers to the interstices between colliding cultures; it is a liminal space "which gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation" (as cited in Darder, 1995, 13). However, Najwa did not wear hijab as a mere outfit to indicate that she was a practicing Muslim. Her attitude to it was in tune with the author's when the latter affirmed in an interview in the *British Guardian* that her perspective of religion was not merely related to a "woman not working or having to dress in a certain way; it was more to do with the faith" (Sethi, 2005, par. 5).

As has already been said, traditional Islamist critics have always asserted that observing veil in all its forms is by no means optional. According to them, all Muslim women must at least cover their entire bodies and heads, with the exception of their faces, and also hands and feet in some Muslim communities. Yet, many Muslim women living in non-Muslim communities have claimed that observing hijab was their own choice; for them, hijab did not only show their Muslim identity, but it also symbolized their piety and devotion.

Unlike traditional Islamists, Aboulela did not put the emphasis on observing a strict form of hijab as an indication of religiosity. In *Minaret*, Aboulela left it up to Najwa to choose whether to wear it or not, and if so, which kind of hijab she should wear to suit the multicultural environment she lived in. Najwa believed that without a real and spiritual faith in Islam there was no point in wearing hijab to demonstrate religious commitment. She stated that hijab "depends on how you wear it, what you wear underneath it" (Aboulela, 2005b, 21), and by this she meant a heart that is full of faith. At the University of Khartoum Najwa and many other Muslim female students did not wear hijab. Najwa remarked, "many girls dressed like me, so I was not unusual" (Aboulela, 2005b, 9). Being an Islamic traditional costume, hijab is worn by both observant and non-observant Muslim females, regardless of their nationality.

Once in London, Najwa talked to her friend Randa about hijab and the Islamic rules of its observation. When her Sudanese friend Randa asked her whether she would "ever

wear a tobe", Najwa answered: "yes but a tobe is different than this. […]. It isn't so strict. With a tobe, the front of your hair shows, your arms show" (Aboulela, 2005b, 21). Actually, female students at the University of Khartoum wore both. Their conversation reveals two different ways to look at hijah: as an obligation, regardless of the place where a Muslim woman lives; and as a mere cultural element or "national costume" (Aboulela, 2005b, 26). It when she moved to London that Najwa freely decided to wear hijab, in her case to make it clear that she was an observant Muslim. She turned to God because she "wanted to be good" (Aboulela, 2005b, 176), and this in turn led her to choose to wear hijab. No doubt her affiliation to a female Muslim community also encouraged her to take such a decision. Before her religious reawakening, Najwa thought that wearing hijab would make her look ugly. Therefore she refused to wear it for fear of being laughed at by her friends. Once in London, however, this fear disappeared; her faith was no longer superficial, but a deeply spiritual one, and this gave her enough strength and resolution to curb all her worldly desires.

Wearing hijab in a non-Muslim society may be seen as a "uniform, the official, outdoor version of [the Muslim women]" (Aboulela, 2005b, 186), but for Najwa it becomes the best tool to be endowed with self-confidence, self-esteem, self-acceptance and self-empowerment: "around me was a new gentleness. The builders who had leered down at me from scaffoldings couldn't see me anymore. I was invisible and they were quiet. All the frissons, all the sparks died away. Everything went soft" (Aboulela, 2005b, 246). She looked at herself in the full-length mirror and saw "another version" of herself: "[I was] regal like my mother, almost mysterious. Perhaps this was attractive in itself, the skill of concealing rather than emphasizing, to restrain rather than to offer" (Aboulela, 2005b, 246).

In Aboulela's novel, Muslim and western styles coexist, as can be seen in Najwa's description of the Muslim women in the mosque: "There were teenagers in jeans and headscarves"; jeans intermingled with headscarves to construct a global Muslim costume, and thus a global Muslim identity (Aboulela, 2005b, 175). The novel also makes it clear that Muslim veiled women in the West had the freedom to go out and work: at the mosque one could also find "neat middle-aged ladies who looked like they had just come in from

work” (Aboulela, 2005b, 175). This being said, it is also a fact that these women sometimes have to cope with harassment and prejudice on the part of “bigoted British individuals” and “secular Arabs” alike (Hassan, 2008, 312). For the latter, the hijab was considered to be only “a uniform” that “irritate[d]” them (Aboulela, 2005b, 135). On the other hand, it also seems that wearing hijab, particularly in its strict form, in a western society after the events of 9/11 by no means serves the purpose of protecting Muslim women. On the contrary, this might entail some kind of risk: Najwa was insulted and attacked on account of this. On the bus, a British man called her “You Muslim scum” and then spilt a soft drink on her head in order to insult her (Aboulela, 2005b, 81).

Western media intensively equated the terms ‘Islam’, ‘Islamic’ and ‘Islamist’ with violence and irrationality (Hunter, 2013, 89). As Kenneth W. Harrow (1991) stated, “Islam has conventionally been reduced to the notion of a predetermined monolith” (3). Elizabeth Poole (2002), for her part, also corroborated that the British press teemed with negative descriptions and images of Muslims, which rendered them foreign and immutably linked together, in a word, dangerous. Portraying Islam as a monolithic entity led many Westerners to think of it as a potentially enormous threat. As Hunter (2013) put it, in tune with Geoffrey Nash (2007): “rhetorical and ideological obfuscation have deprived much of the West’s public of accurate knowledge of the sophistication, the variety, and the fissures in societies where versions of Islam predominate” (Hunter, 2013, 89). In the post-9/11 world, Islam was therefore looked at as a political movement rife with violence and devoid of faith and compassion.

It must also be added that the imposition of the veil as a means to subject Muslim women was not limited to Muslim patriarchal communities; western neo-colonizing powers have also subtly encouraged its use to make clear their superiority over Muslim countries and cultures. According to Moore (2008), in the West the hijab is sometimes endowed with an “aura of erotic mystique”, but more often than not prompts what this critic labels as a “xenophobic, Islamophobic gaze” (138). Alison Donnell’s words (2003) in relation to the Post-11 September era also corroborate this:

> Attitudes to and representations of the veil have overwhelmingly demonstrated the intransigence of the veiled woman as an icon of oppression – an embodiment of the rationale for the continuation of George W. Bush's war without end, a strategic figure constantly evoked as a visual reminder of the incommensurability of western and Islamic societies. (132)

Similarly, in *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992), Leila Ahmed observed that in most colonial discourses Islam is depicted as a misogynist religion. Hijab and segregation are shown as specifically Islamic, and are thus severely criticized because they hinder women's progress and social participation. No doubt such a depiction asserts the inferiority of Muslims and their communities, an idea that western powers have often used as an excuse to keep them under control; only by casting off such practices intrinsic to Islam could Muslims embark on the path of civilization (Ahmed, 1992, 152), they seem to suggest. The hijab was, for Ahmed, the symbol of women's degradation and backwardness; this is why it often became "the open target of colonial attack" (1992, 152). It is clear that Aboulela's fiction tries to counter this negative image of Muslim veiled women in dominant western discourses. For Aboulela, hijab is commonly associated with Islam and the practice of its teachings. Thus, it should not be necessarily linked to any particular nationality. Moreover, it is a fact that not all Muslim women are veiled; many have decided not to observe hijab, even within conservative societies. Aboulela herself and her protagonist Najwa are good examples of this. When Najwa decides to wear hijab in London, this by no means oppresses her, but rather bestows on her a new identity which defines her as a Muslim only, an identity that liberates her from the burden of her traumatic past.

As Aboulela has often affirmed, just as western women have struggled to attain their rights, have their own identity and be able to make their own decisions, Muslim women should have the freedom to decide whether to observe the hijab or not. They should also have the right to follow or leave out what the Islamic religion dictates they should or should not do. Yet, Aboulela's fiction in general, and *Minaret* in particular, invite Muslim women in the West to revert to Islam as their best option, and convey the message that immigrant Muslims can be further empowered by claiming a Muslim transnational identity.

Chapter 5

5.1. Alia Mamdouh: A Muslim Feminist Voice from Iraq

Alia Mamdouh Jamil is an Iraqi feminist novelist, short story writer, journalist and editor. She was born in one of the old houses in al-A'damiyya district of Baghdad in 1944 of an Iraqi father and a Syrian mother. She studied in its schools, and completed her secondary education in al-A'damiyya Evening High School because she was working in the morning to support her family after the death of her father. She pursued her BA studies at al-Mustansiriya University in Baghdad and graduated with a degree in Education and Psychology in 1971. After graduation, she faced the strictness of Muslim society and ran away with the man she loved.

Alia's early years can be seen through the heroine of her examined novel, Huda. There is a great similarity between Alia and Huda, whom Abu-Haidar identifies as the author's "one-time alter ego" (2004, 197). Like Huda's, Alia's mother was Syrian, and died of consumption when Huda was only three years old. Her grandmother was an authoritative woman who provided her and her younger brother with both paternal and maternal nurturance. In an autobiographical article, Mamdouh talked frankly about her father who, also like Huda's, was a police officer whom she "had to face" and was "determined to confuse" by "being submissive at home and rebellious outside" (Mamdouh, 1998, 63). Alia's father was also tormented by neurosis; however, she admired his being a handsome man.

Since her childhood, Alia perceived the incongruity between "oppressive traditions and the bird who wanted to sing separately from the flock of boys and girls of the family". She asserts that she was certain that one day she would fly away from such oppressive traditions forever, which she ultimately did. Mamdouh withdrew into herself when she realized that the patriarchal authorities "wanted to extract every thought in [her] head, one by one, like decayed teeth" (Mamdouh, 1998, 66).

Mamdouh embarked on writing from a very young age by publishing some short stories in prestigious magazines, such as *al-Hasnaa al-Beirutia* (Beirut's Belle) and al-Ma'arif al-Suria (Syrian Knowledge), under a pseudonym, Alia Ramzi, due to her father's

refusal to allow her to get involved in any literary related activity. She put her real name on her works after her father's death. Mamdouh is a regular contributor to a variety of Arab magazines and newspapers. She perceived the meaning of existence and fought the tyranny of fear and oppression with writing.

She also confesses that fear is the most powerful motivation in her life, and saves no effort to control this emotion through her writing. She states, "Fear shapes the space of my writing. It has resolved many things and is behind many decisions" (Mamdouh, 1998, 65). In almost all her works, Mamdouh argues that in traditional Muslim communities, where patriarchal authority rules by the name of Islam, fear resides everywhere and has become one of the characteristics of such communities. She writes, "Our Arab fear appears to be a multi-headed monster feeding on the poison which stems from our conditioning to submit, to fragment and to keep it all to ourselves. It is our upbringing which, upon analysis, proves utterly dangerous, even criminal" (Mamdouh, 1998, 67).

She stresses that the fear she is writing about is not limited to men's oppressive deeds against women, since "page after page of [her] diaries record the acts of women. They were even more tyrannical and moralistic than the men" (Mamdouh, 1998, 63). She further explains that fear is not Muslim women's isolated case. It is rather a shared experience in traditional Muslim societies, where traditions are reinforced by the misuse of religion. "My family's behavior in public derived from the secret fear which lived in everyone, rotating in an ever widening circle, from the living room to the shared bedrooms, encompassing the school, the street, and even public baths", she comments (Mamdouh, 1998, 66).

Due to the great pain she has gone through and the oppression she has suffered in her life, Mamdouh's novels are rife with wails, losses and disappointments. Like Nawal El Saadawi, Mamdouh has never sailed but against all the currents. Her novels have broken all the taboos, overstepped all the red lines, traditions and conventions in a conservative Muslim society that grinds and is ground down by religious hypocrisy.

As she rejected being caged, she migrated and landed in a number of cities. Mamdouh left Iraq permanently on June 8, 1982 for purely personal reasons, particularly

regarding her relationship with her husband, as she refused to send her only son to the front of the Irani-Iraqi war. Living in exile, she temporarily settled in Beirut, Morocco, Tunis and England before residing permanently in Paris. It could thus be said that the Iraqi expatriate novelist Alia Mamdouh, winner of the Naguib Mahfouz Prize in 2004 for her novel *The Beloved,* lives in an exile of her own choice (Abdulrazaq, 2013, par. 1).

In her exile, she has been successful in portraying her own cultural heritage. She is considered to be a "poignant and bold voice in contemporary Arabic literature" (Abu-Haidar, 1998, 306). Among her most influential novels is *Naphtalene: A Novel of Baghdad*, her second novel, which has been translated into many languages. This novel in particular is what makes her known to a number of western readers, as it draws attention to Iraqi contemporary fiction, "hitherto little known in the West" (Abu-Haidar, 1998, 306).

Centering on the reality of a Baghdadi working-class household in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Mamdouh's *Naphtalene* is an "extraordinary book about beginnings, a kind of Bildungsroman of Baghdad". It pieces together the fragments of a "prophetic childhood" in remembering the "primary elements of subjective life" and presents an artistic vision of the world (Cixous, 2004, v). It tells the story of an old neighbourhood and unforgettable memories of a young Iraqi girl and a group of frustrated women. Abu-Haidar (2004) states that Mamdouh has evoked the "lost innocence of a bygone age", and that Mamdouh herself frequently restates in interviews that what prompted her to write this novel was "a sudden urge to the world of her childhood and the individuals who inhabited it" (197).

The story is narrated through the voice of the nine-year-old girl protagonist and leading character in the novel, Huda. Through her developing consciousness, we learn not only about the people in her family and the atmosphere of the neighborhood, but also all about the political situation in Iraq at that time and the culture of this country. Huda is the granddaughter of Ahmad Maarouf family, a well-known family with an extended and complex web of relationships. Huda lives with her father Jamil, her mother Iqbal, her brother Adil, her paternal grandmother Wafiqa and her unmarried aunt Farida. The family's

small house is located on the bank of the Tigris River. It is an old and bustling area in al-A’damiyya, Baghdad, where the author herself lived before leaving the country.

In *Naphtalene*, there is a continuous switch between the first person narrator in which the pronoun “I” stands for Huda, the second person narrator, through which Huda talks to herself in an internal dialogue addressing herself with the pronoun “you”, and a third person narrator that is also employed sometimes so that Huda is referred to with the pronoun “she”. Such a constant switch allows the reader to witness the recounted events from different viewpoints. Besides, there is a constant switch between the past and the present which further complicates the time frame of the novel.

5.1.1. Muslim Feminist Literature and Mamdouh’s Contribution

As has already been said, there has recently been an increasing interest in the phenomenon of Muslim women writing, or Islamic feminist literature, as this genre has become known on a global scale. The studies carried out on this kind of literature show the uniqueness of the creativity of Muslim women, especially in the field of fiction. The novel, in particular, has been able to absorb Muslim women’s experiences, their thoughts, and the multiple societal problems that surround them on all sides. It is also widely known that women’s literary works were, and are still, the subject of widespread controversy and an endless debate.

Such a debate derives its legitimacy from many aspects, ranging from the so-called Islamic feminist literature to the specificity of the female gender, which contrasts with male dominance and the cultural stereotyping of women in Muslim societies in particular. The argument does not end up with the issues included in the creative texts which address the contents that call for rebellion against the prevailing and inherited traditions which have become part of Islamic teachings over time, but also prompts liberation from the patriarchal authority by celebrating the body and eroticism.

Moreover, Mamdouh argues that Arab literature suffers from two major issues. The first is that many Arab writers allow their literary track to be “dictated to them” in an attempt to meet the western perspective, while the second is that the West is incapable of understanding Arabic literature because it has only a “superficial” knowledge of Arab

culture and Islam (as cited in Chollet, 2002). And when the West seems to be attempting to understand Muslim Arabs' aspirations, it only perceives what corresponds to its "prejudiced views" (Chollet, 2002, par. 8).

In fact, there are so many differences between the western and Muslim Arab cultures that these stand in the way of understanding each other. They differ in their religions, languages, thoughts and logic. They also have contrasting concepts regarding honour and family, freedom and truth, and even friendship and generosity. Such discrepancies led, and still lead, to mutual misunderstanding between Muslims and the West.

However, Mamdouh claims that the West imposed and still imposes its thoughts, modes, theories of literary criticism and analytical categories, without attempting to invent new ways or establish new connections to get along with Muslims and understand their peculiarities. According to her, the contribution of some Muslim writers prompts the West to look at Muslims as if they were an object that can be used in different ways. They are sometimes seen as if they were "perpetrators of violence and terrorism", while at other times they are viewed as "victims of underdevelopment" (as cited in Chollet, 2002, par. 9). Mamdouh does not conceal her disdain against any literary work authored by an Arab Muslim writer who seeks to attract western readers and critics through reiterating their perspectives.

In an interview with her, she criticized the way Nawal El Saadawi "turns *creativity* which is imagination and *living memory* into a lab to show sick samples which are deformed and which she represents as generalized social types", like the heroine El Saadawi introduced in her *Woman at Point Zero* (Amireh, 1996a, par. 8; emphasis added). Mamdouh has also stated that she has "large question marks about the West's celebration and focus" on El Saadawi (Amireh, 1996a, par. 9). She accuses El Saadawi of presenting an unreal image of Muslim women's creativity. In her assessment of this writer, Mamdouh concurs with some male critics who firmly declare their hostility against El Saadawi and her feminist thoughts.

Mamdouh maintains that El Saadawi writes “scientific research which is good. But she writes bad novels”, and that it is unfair that the western reader or critic should think that what El Saadawi writes represents the totality of Muslim women’s creative writing (Amireh, 1996a, par. 9). In spite of dismissing her as a good novelist, Mamdouh, however, appreciates El Saadawi’s feminist thoughts and the leading role she has played in defending Muslim women and their rights. She considers her own generation of novelists as the “superior representatives” of Muslim women’s creativity. Although she is suspicious of the little popularity her writing is getting outside the Arab Muslim world, she thinks that the little attention her writing receives in the West is ultimately for her benefit, because it gives her the chance to contribute a nuanced representation that provokes and enlightens the western reader rather than merely “confirming their ready-made assumptions and prejudices” (Amireh, 1996a, par. 9).

Like El Saadawi, Mamdouh’s fiction represents a revolutionary reaction and an evident challenge of the prevailing and inherited traditions in Muslim communities, particularly through her expression of women’s issues in ways that give them clear privacy dimensions. However, the tone with which Mamdouh denounces male domination in the novel under analysis, for instance, is milder than that used by El Saadawi. This is why *Naphtalene* received favorable reviews in the Arab press when it was first published in Cairo in 1986 (Abu-Haidar, 1998, 309), while almost all of El Saadawi’s novels are derisively perceived as a public antagonizing of Islam and the great Arab culture.

Mamdouh’s fiction in general, and *Naphtalene* in particular, lends itself to be interpreted on several levels, and different implied messages can be extracted out of it. For instance, her severe censure of the traditions and the way they are reinforced by the misuse of religion can be inferred from her way of introducing the younger male generation. She presents Huda’s younger brother Adil and Mahmood, Huda’s first love, as gentle and considerate toward females. She delineated them in a manner that dramatically contradicts the oppressive treatment of Huda’s grandfather, her father and uncle Munir. It seems that Mamdouh emphasizes the idea that aggressiveness is not an inborn attribute of men in traditional Muslim societies. Rather, Muslim men are conditioned to dominate Muslim

women in environments in which men's dominance is mistakenly perceived as strength, and women's blind compliance as denoting chastity and honor.

In traditional Muslim communities, it was believed that "if a boy trains on a horse he becomes nice-looking" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 37). This is what Huda concludes when she learned from her grandmother that her grandfather used to take out her father Jamil every day, and "have him lead the horse and ride him" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 37). Within two weeks of training, Jamil "had changed": "He was different. His flesh had become firm, his voice had changed–he was like a beast of prey" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 37). When his father sent him out at night, he "wasn't afraid". In contrast, in accordance with Islamic traditions rather than true Islamic teachings, "a girl's beauty is in her silence and modesty" and her unquestioning submission to what is dictated by patriarchy (Mamdouh, 2013b, 37). In fact, this is the way Muslim boys and girls are brought up in traditional communities in order to sustain patriarchal power and dominance in such communities.

Thus, despite the transformations in people's lives and the country in general which took place after colonialism, Mamdouh expects no progress in Muslim females' condition as long as the patriarchal authority exploits religion and traditions in order to strictly rule society. Girls "never looked back much, and when they looked ahead their glance was a combination of indifference and annoyance", Huda maintains (Mamdouh, 2013b, 159).

5.1.2. Exile as a Creative Impetus in Mamdouh's Fiction

Iraq has witnessed a myriad of political and ideological events and transformations which have had a great and profound impact, especially on Iraqi intellectuals, who have been at the heart of these events and transformations. In the late 1960s, the Iraqi intellectuals were either leftist communists who were the dominant, nationalist Baathists (affiliated to el-Baath party, the only allowed party up to 2003), or a few independent liberals. When el-Baath party took power in Iraq in 1968, it established a new state that adopted a one-party ideology which, in turn, enforced an integrated project to politicize life and culture in its favour. It made an explicit and official invitation to establish Baathist literature in Iraq, and expelled and suppressed any alternative culture, regardless of its orientation.

During that period, writers and intellectuals migrated in large numbers to various foreign countries, and often settled there. The direct causes of such migration were the clash of culture with politics and power, the partisan and governmental monopoly on culture, as well as the war that broke out between Iraq and Iran, and the deterioration of the economic situation. In addition, purely personal reasons for some writers, as is the case of Alia Mamdouh, were effectively present. The migration of those Iraqi writers led to the emergence of a new phenomenon in Iraqi literature, known as the literature of exile, in which these writers focused essentially on their experience inside and outside Iraq. Among such writers are Alia Mamdouh, Jinan Jassim Hillawi, Samira el-Mana'a, Salam Abood and Fadhil el-Azawi, to mention but some (Ahmed, 2017, 23).

A novel belonging to this type of literature is mostly characterized by its emphasis on political issues in general, and in particular themes of dictatorship, war, fear, coercion, repression, imprisonment, alienation and the situation of the Iraqi refugees. This is what the reader can perceive in most of Alia Mamdouh's novels. Although these writers left their homelands and endeavoured to settle in other alternative countries, their motherlands have not departed from their memories, which dig up into events and issues related to their experiences there. It is noticeable that the Iraqi novelist's focus has been, in many cases, on capturing the painful and difficult experiences s/he has undergone or witnessed in her/his native country. In such novels, the writer attempts to restore the scenic spot of the lost time and place (Ulaiwy, 2008, 100-101).

Additionally, as is stated by Abdulmuni'm (2019), the dramatic formations of the phenomenon of alienation present in the intellectual, philosophical, psychological, social and religious propositions, represent one of the pillars of the modern Arab narrative discourse and its aesthetics. These writers also strive to condemn the intellectual and cultural frameworks of the colonizer, western feminism and/or regional, religious or local authoritarianism (10).

These narratives can also be viewed as a means to demonstrate the dark side of political and religious ideologies, which may at first sight have a glamorous or ideal appearance, because these writers did not find the freedom to expose such matters in their

homelands. At the same time, these literary contributions described the transformations that took place in Muslim Arab societies, particularly in their confrontation with the West or in their reception of a number of changes that reshaped their internal structure and some other functional values with ideological, cognitive, religious and sometimes ethnic dimensions (Abdulmuni'm, 2019, 11).

Quwaider (2021) also observes that the literary works of Muslim feminists in exile focus on the denunciation of persecution. Instead of introducing the text to the reader as a literary one leaning on its structural and artistic formation, it offers one loaded with the author’s own experiences. These experiences, in turn, introduce the author himself as a refugee who fled persecution in her/his original homeland due to religious and cultural beliefs, social norms, and political, security and economic incidents (59).

These novelists, when trying to create a story that links them to their absent homeland, tend to narrate memories, especially those related to childhood days, as is the case in Mamdouh’s *Naphtalene*, where she tells the reader her own stories through her young heroine, Huda; she delves into the depths of exile by portraying the suffering of an exiled person who has lost her homeland, and the difficulties that she may face living in a largely different society with a non-Muslim majority.

According to some critics, writing about the western society requires a mature experience of exile on the part of the writer; and this, in turn, requires a reasonable span of time to elapse so that other places, events and personalities can crystallize in her/his mind, no longer exclusively preoccupied with personal concerns related to her/his lost homeland (Ulaiwy, 2008, 100-101). As regards Mamdouh’s novels, it is clear that both trajectories conflate: alienation, nostalgia, painful memories and her evocation of the national place and time coexist with her views on the West and its feminism.

It seems for some readers, like me, that the protagonist of the novel is the city, as its very title suggests, and that the conditions of society precede the existential state of its individuals. Mamdouh has allocated the place more significance than the people who inhabit it, and the historical explanation of social phenomena precedes the interest in people’s motives.

In this novel, Mamdouh employs Huda to evoke the sights, smells and sounds of the city, Baghdad, in the 1950s. Huda, however, immerses and disorients readers, at turns, via her switching modes of concentration on the world of el-Adhamiya district and its people. She brilliantly portrays the life of poverty, childhood, fear of her mother's imminent death due to consumption, her affinity with the mainstay of the family and the Islamic authority depicted by her grandmother, and above all her opposition to patriarchal authority as represented by her brutal father. In this novel, Mamdouh tells the reader about her memories and the details of the Iraqi life with all its exclusive rituals, customs and traditions, in particular in el-Adhamiya and Karbala due to their historical and religious significance in Iraq.

She takes the reader on a trip into the horizons and secrets of the life of an Iraqi girl from her childhood to her adolescence. This is what seems to be the core of the novel. The author analyzes the psychology of a girl possessed by fear under the auspices of a broken family, and overshadowed by doubt and troubling questions that have dovetailed into the naughtiness of childhood and the stubbornness of adolescence. Mamdouh opens her novel with a descriptive paragraph that puts in a nutshell the whole world it aims to depict. Huda talks to herself:

> The clouds are over your head and the trials of life are always ahead of you. Just look at your father. It seems to you that he is driving a truck. Your mother is sitting in the back, monopolizing the silence and illness. The rest of the herd are playing inside the detention camp, growling a little, then falling silent. (Mamdouh, 2013b, 1)

Thus, from the very first lines of the novel, the reader enters Huda's world and the atmosphere of her family to become aware of her obsessions and concerns. The father is a solid, authoritarian person who casts terror among his family members, particularly his two children, Huda and Adel. Huda describes her father, who epitomizes the strict authority of the ruling party:

> His shadow, his name, and his voice went right through us. We huddled together like terrified puppies. It was no use burying our heads under a pillow or wriggling

> up against our grandmother –he could hear our pulse as soon as he entered our street, and we could hear him muttering between his teeth– we were about to drop to the ground. (Mamdouh, 2013b, 30-31)

Paradoxically, Huda admired her father's good looks, despite all the horror associated with his personality, and the fact that she and her younger brother Adil "crouched between his arms, poisoned by the fury he exhaled from his pores" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 33). Her father's presence had a powerful effect, not only on his family, but also on the whole neighbourhood. When women encountered him in the street, they "opened their cloaks so he could see their bodies undulating and their winking eyes, and their teeth poised on their lips". Everybody stood up and greeted him as he passed by, "utterly quite". Men "tightened their belts over their blue, white, or striped *dishdashas* (ankle-length robe). They adjusted their headgear, determined to stand up and greet him" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 31).

The late admiration that Huda shows for her father, despite all his cruelty and harshness, can be interpreted as the yearning for her past in her homeland, regardless of all its painful memories. The picture of her father further improved when the government forced the entire neighbourhood to evacuate their homes to carry out a developing plan in the area. Huda was overwhelmed by sadness when moving out of the place in which she lived her beloved childhood. Such circumstances prompted some sympathy towards her father.

> All those whom I loved left me, and all that time retraced its tracks to its original place. It went past my old dress and ugliness of others and said, 'This far and not further. Do not turn back to pursue me, and do not look at me.' The dark mocking Tigris-I never do anything in front of it with ease. I was savage and cursed it with obscenities. But my thoughts turned to my father. I understood fatherhood, and instantly my father became precious. In our street, only my father was real. He never concocted stories or lied, never won or remembered. (Mamdouh, 2013b, 182)

On the contrary, Huda's mother, Iqbal, who is sick with tuberculosis, "monopolizes silence". She "never went to the market". She was bound to "al-Adhamiyya district. She stumbled there. She came from Aleppo [in Syria], married in Karbala [a holly city in Iraq],

got pregnant on a cold iron bed, coughed in the ancient bathroom, and gave birth to us on the floor" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 74). Huda witnesses her mother's surrender to her father's totalitarianism, his domination and the way he treats her as if she were only a maid, especially when her health condition started to worsen. "I want a real woman. I've given you my best years and my heart's blood, but all in vain. Go back to your family. Go back where you came from", Jamil shouts to Iqbal (Mamdouh, 2013b, 43).

Despite the harsh treatment that Iqbal received from her husband, she "knelt before him and trembled so that her teeth chattered". She regularly sobbed and "reached for his legs and grasped his boots. She removed them and placed them side by side". Iqbal reminded her husband that a "woman may fall ill, be treated and cured, but she should never be abandoned" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 44).

Another sample of the oppression exerted against women is Huda's paternal aunt, Farida, who is also introduced as a submissive spinster woman. She has been waiting to marry her cousin, Munir, the socially and morally notorious man who was chosen for her, but is abandoned by him on the very day of the wedding without any reason. Consequently, Farida suffered a mental breakdown and a period of extreme emotional stress. "She went into the bath and wept there, shouted, and unleashed her voice upon us. She came out half naked and stood in the middle of the courtyard, shouting. While Grandmother stood in front of her, praying and breathing on her, seizing and pulling her, encircling her with her arms" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 177).

Except for those belonging to the younger generation, such as children, all other male-female relationships presented in the novel are based on the exploitation and mistreatment of females. Mamdouh's *Naphtalene* contributes a true-to-life depiction of the problematic and complex relationships for both males and females in a traditional Muslim society like that of Baghdad in the 1940s and 1950s. The relationships of Huda's parents and her aunt Farida with her fiancé Munir are the most prominent ones. Both Huda's father and uncle Munir exemplify the figure of the oppressive man. Such relationships typify the stereotypical marital relationships from which a Muslim woman rarely deviated in the 1950s.

Despite the fact that Iqbal is meekly obedient to her husband, Jamil leaves her for another woman. And despite her initial rebellion against him, she finally leaves the house, returns where she came from and dies there. Similarly, Farida’s revolt against Munir is followed by her subjugation into non-existence. Huda states, “Let Farida, electrified by her constant laziness and long mistakes, walk to Uncle Munir. Let her rock back and forth to the music if her head is bowed or her hand is bound. Let her swallow his saliva, his water, and his phlegm; let the first Farida disappear” (Mamdouh, 2013b, 69).

In contrast to this, Huda’s grandmother, Wafiqa, who excels in religiosity “as if she were created only for worship”, was “well aware of devils” and used to recite to her daughter Farida and her granddaughter Huda the Qur’anic verse of the Throne so that their “hell would become more bearable” and they would “steer clear of any evil temptation”. However, though the “strength of her faith” inspired Huda and fostered her revolutionary spirit to a great extent, the grandmother was neither able to deter Jamil’s oppressive deeds against his wife and his children nor compel Munir to put an end to his fiancée’s suffering (Mamdouh, 2013b, 1-2).

The impotence of the grandmother, who represents religion in the face of patriarchal authority as represented by Jamil and Munir, can be interpreted as the patriarchal manipulation and monopoly of religion to sustain man’s dominance and power. Nonetheless, another reading of this novel may suggest that Huda’s inspiration is clearly awakened by the religious faith of her grandmother, which means that the very religion that patriarchy has misused to oppress women can in turn be used to serve the cause of the oppressed. In other words, adhering to a true Islam that is free from traditions and patriarchal manipulation will ensure a decent life for women and guarantee their rights.

It could also be concluded that the novelist endeavours to depict the authority that was ruling the country with an iron fist by introducing the character of the authoritarian father, to whom the majority of society shows affection and respect so as to gain his approval and shun his indignation. On the other hand, the grandmother’s figure might be said to represent the religious authority which goes along with the ruling authority and does not openly oppose it. As for the other characters, such as the mother, Huda, Adel, the aunt

and the rest of women in particular, they represent the oppressed and the helpless who under totalitarian patriarchal authority had no option other than migration.

In addition, the novel can be seen as the embodiment of the Muslim female's world in all its stages and crises, inherited from one generation to another. The novelist presents Huda's story, and through this describes the life of the granddaughter, mother, aunt, grandmother, and offers snippets from the lives of other women.

Mamdouh does not introduce the story as a mere narrative. Rather, the heroine's behaviour highlights Mamdouh's disconformity and alienation. What is told about Huda in this novel reflects the author's childhood and the way she rejected patriarchal authority since a very young age. Like Mamdouh herself, Huda differs from her brother Adel, as she exhibits violence and rebellion in an open way. Adel "was order, melancholy, and introspection", which normally characterize Muslim females rather than males, while Huda was "anarchy, insolence, and violence". Her footsteps "annoyed the people in the house" and the way she walked in the neighbourhood "provoked danger" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 4).

Huda, the protagonist of the novel, is the rebellious child who expresses herself spontaneously, unaware of the inability of her Muslim community, and her family in particular, to understand the psychology of a special girl who seeks to communicate with people in a way that clearly differs from the traditional subservience of Muslim girls.

In the rest of the novel, Mamdouh additionally displays many other psychological and familial frustrations. The mother dies, the father suffers from a mental disorder and is dismissed from his job, and the aunt is divorced before she gets married. As for the heroine, Huda, and her brother, who represent the younger generation, their lives are left open without any anticipated ends.

In view of what was mentioned before, it is quite obvious that the plot of the novel is a mixture of the unjust treatment of women, the oppression of childhood, and the constant demand for the 'ideal' child rather than the natural one. In such a world, both women and children are required to accustom themselves to blind obedience and complete surrender. Huda, as a nonconformist girl, seems devoid of any childlike characteristics.

What is also worth mentioning is that, when writing *Naphtalene* the author has chosen a turbulent time in the history of Iraq and the Muslim Arab world as a whole: the 1940s and 1950s, the days that followed English rule, the establishment of Nuri al-Said government, and the emergence of communism, civil unrest and students' demonstrations. Huda observes, "All Baghdad joined the insurrection that day. Cities, villages, and coffeehouses shut down, shops closed up, the universities wrote their banners and students flew them, green, white, and red". She adds, "the high schools let out most of their classes; each class covered the rear of the one before it, the faces of the police and their cudgels and sticks wanted even more of these bodies and heads" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 170). Even Huda's father, who is a police officer, took the day off and returned to Baghdad to take part in the demonstrations. He "took off his uniform and slipped into the crowd" and the grandmother smiled when she saw him there (Mamdouh, 2013b, 170).

Mamdouh has also referred to issues of Zionist colonialism, the boiling of Muslim Arab masses demanding a movement to liberate Palestine and what accompanied these events in relation to the rule of Gamal Abdel Nasser, and how people in Arab countries wrapped around the radio to listen to his national speeches: "Nasser came and infiltrated our vocal cords and set all the secrets free". Inspired by Abdel Nasser, Iraqi people "entered into the rapture and began to chant: 'Curse the English, curse reaction, down with colonialism and the Regent. Say Palestine in Arab. Down with Zionism'. Stop stuttering. Fight", Huda recounts (Mamdouh, 2013b, 171). Notwithstanding these significant moments, time on the whole remains without any active or influential space, as it is not linked to any major event in particular.

Perhaps what stands out most in the novel is the presence of the memories of old Baghdad with all its special features and unique fragrance. "There was long Rashid Street, broader and cleaner than our street. […] This was the Rasafa side; between Rasafa and Karkh, Harun al-Rashid [the fifth caliph and the religious and political leader of the Islamic state] used to listen to riddles and puzzles". Huda adds, "this was Baghdad, the city of cites" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 74). It is quite clear that the Baghdadi atmosphere conforms the main setting of the novel as a whole.

What further distinguishes Mamdouh's fiction from that of other Muslims in the diaspora is the accentuated presence of her homeland and its people in her novels. Her yearning for a distant past and the nostalgia for her country and all the people she knew in her childhood are what induced her to pen *Naphtalene.* In an article she published in an Arabic journal, Mamdouh stated that she had carried in her memory all the events, characters and places in this novel for a long time.

> The first streets one walks in, the familiar bookshelves and the dust in the air … Baghdad, the political demonstrations, my own neighborhood, the butcher, the blind woman […] the nationalization of the Suez Canal, Nasser, the local coffee house, the mosque, my first visits to the shrines of Muslim saints. […] Do I just keep quiet and push them out of my mind? (as cited in Abu-Haidar, 1998, 308)

Cixous (2004) remarks that *Naphtalene* (which means aromatic hydrocarbon) "preserves the remnants, clothing, and memories of two powerful sites of childhood: a little girl and a great city of Baghdad" (v). It also evokes its "links to perfumes, days, and odors", which are sprinkled throughout the novel. *Naphtalene* is overloaded with histories, real incidents, dreams and fantasies with which Mamdouh desperately endeavours to preserve her own memories in the form of social documents. In her article "Creatures of Arab Fear", she also comments, "No sooner is the cupboard of childhood opened than the aroma of the house – a mixture of fear and submission – wafts into my face and settles there" (Mamdouh, 1998, 63).

Examining Mamdouh's novels in general, and *Naphtalene* in particular, the reader will not be oblivious to the novelist's focus on her homeland, the denunciation of persecution and the way in which she presented herself in the world of her novel as a fugitive who fled the persecution imposed by the traditional social norms reinforced by the misuse of religion in her country. Reading Mamdouh's fiction, one realizes that oppression and persecution have become distinctive characteristics that are hardly absent in any of her literary works, and that such experiences closely connect the novelist with her missed home.

5.2. Women's Rebellion: Between Inherited Injustice and the Awareness of Patriarchal Power

As is well known, the form and content of a novel are derived from social phenomena more directly than is the case with other literary genres (Ahmed, 2012, par. 1). The novel, with its philosophical ideas, opinions and theories, interacts with and expresses the social, political, intellectual and philosophical contexts of both the society out of which it emerged and its individuals. On the one hand, it can be considered to be the product of the interaction between the writer and her/his society, while on the other is regarded as the interaction between the writer herself/himself and the philosophical framework to which s/he belongs. The writer complies, in one way or another, with the fact that her/his fictional world must have a relationship with the lived reality, the main reference for many narrative discourses.

In an interview with Mona Chollet, Alia Mamdouh asked "what weight do all the books on earth have compared to the groans of the people of Iraq, Palestine, and Bosnia?" (as cited in Burrell, 2004, 38). In almost all of her novels, she intensively focuses on people's concerns regardless of their sex. In fact, articulating human anxieties is what characterizes Mamdouh's fiction; this becomes the main and dominant theme of her narrative imagination. Everything that is related to or has influence on people's lives, sociopolitical aspects in particular, engrosses her vision. "In her own work as a fearless writer and thinker, Mamdouh consistently brings art's power to subvert tyranny and repression to bear" (Burrell, 2004, 38). Her works have strongly criticized domestic totalitarianism as reinforced by traditions and the misuse of religion, the politics of fear and western imperialism.

Political content takes up a large part of the writer's fictional world, and has a significant and direct influence to determine the outlines of this world, the course of events and the impact it has on characters. According to Ahmed (2012), interest in the characters who represent the motivating force in the narrative, and attempts to penetrate their feelings and conscience in relation to the events and situations of the fictional world are what Mamdouh endeavours to adopt as an act of expression (par. 3).

What is obvious is that Mamdouh's fiction closely resembles revolutionary action, and this is evident in its challenging of inherited Muslim traditions and the ways in which

it expresses women's struggle. This, in turn, has bestowed upon her some peculiarities, especially the impression that women are stronger than men in their imagination. Mamdouh has been absorbed in highlighting the character of the struggling Muslim woman or, in other words, Muslim women's struggle. What is outstanding in her novels is that the Muslim woman she has delineated is not concerned with domestic matters or small and trivial issues. Rather, Mamdouh's main female characters have a cause and show awareness and deep belief in it.

As was mentioned previously, the advent of Islam honored women and granted them rights equal to those of men. In addition, the average Muslim woman in our contemporary world is totally different from those of the past, as many have now sufficient education and culture to enter the sociopolitical arena and stand by men to carry out the fight against oppression in all of its forms. Therefore, a Muslim woman should not be now marginalized or looked down on as she was before.

Mamdouh's fictional woman is aware of her needs, makes sacrifices in order to reach her goal, strives to achieve her autonomy through work and humanist struggle, and supports men in their battle against the forces of oppression and tyranny (Ahmed, 2012, par. 3). The theme of women's struggle for the freedom of both people and their land is the most salient one in almost all of Mamdouh's novels. Her female characters are staunch warriors who neither fear death nor weapons; they welcome death when it brings freedom, and never hesitate to do whatever is necessary to defend themselves and protect their land.

In *Naphtalene*, Mamdouh depicts a collective female heroism that includes different categories and ages. Huda, the heroine, is a smart, conscious, courageous and daring teenage girl who is willing to expand the margins of her freedom and exploit limitations to improve her knowledge. Obviously, the emblem of disconformity in Mamdouh's *Naphtalene* is Huda, who has a "strong little heart" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 60). As the story opens, Huda lively plays and roams the neighbourhood alleys with other children, particularly boys. The way she freely plays and behaves often earns her the shouts of anger and disgust from both her family and the neighbours. In the public women bath, where women regularly gather to bathe and gossip, Huda loudly frolics among

women when she accompanies her aunt there. It is there that Huda made her "first observation" and "won first arguments and shouted 'No' 'no' among the long 'Yeses'" she heard from all other women. There she was "given the bloody title of Huda, a flaming fire" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 24). In the bath, she used to cause a fuss by splashing, hiding the soap and being noisy.

> I slipped away from them all, glided between their legs, and the cakes of soap pushed me far, and I landed in the lap of one woman, her face covered with soap lather. She shrieked, 'God Almighty, God damn you and damn the bloody day you were born!' I hid the cake of soap in the big buckets, dunked the bowls into the hot water and poured it over their heads, burning their scalps and skin. I pissed in the great tank, I clamped some of the children between my legs; I kept this one away from that one and began to massage their heads with the pumice stone until they were bloody. (Mamdouh, 2013b, 24)

As was stated by Cixous (2004), "neither family structure, nor institution, nor streets, nor feelings, nothing at all can resist the fireworks of *naphtha* named Huda—genial Huda, devil of society, of the City, and of the novel—a trial of gunpowder" (vi). Cixous (2004) adds that Huda is a girl only in appearance, as she is a boy in disguise. However, in "poetic truth" she is a "*fiery daughter*" (vi; emphasis in original).

Like the author, Huda has constantly been assertive and defiant in rejecting patriarchal totalitarianism despite her very young age. The relationship between Huda and her tyrannical father has been antagonistic since her very birth. Being a fussy girl who never abides by absolute patriarchal authority and Islamic traditions, Huda's life has been characterized by battering. She "provided an outlet" for her father's wrath; she was harshly beaten for the slightest misdeed, such as playing outdoors or going up to the roof at night.

Despite the fact that Jamil has been uncompromising to discipline Huda, she keeps on defying him, "he did not frighten me the way he frightened Adil and my mother" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 15). She sometimes satisfies her daring spirit when she provokes her father, and is aware of her predicament: "your head was dizzy from being hit. They had stuffed it with slaps and commandments. You took the remains of sins and stayed that way"

(Mamdouh, 2013b, 15). Although her father repeatedly threatened to severely punish her if she stepped out or played with boys, Huda did not retreat and went out, thus ignoring all her father's threats. "You're in the street again, and the children brought me back into their authority", Huda says to herself (Mamdouh, 2013b, 60).

In one of their confrontations, Jamil points his pistol to Huda's head threatening to shoot her: "he brandished his pistol: 'I swear to God, if you come here again, I'll kill you!'". However, she remained defiant. "At ten you confronted the first policeman in your life, your father. You summoned up all the sins of ten, the rashness and recklessness, the lies and tempting dreams, the yearning to get sunburned in order to shine more: get all this out of your rib cage", Huda says to herself in relation to this experience (Mamdouh, 2013b, 59).

She meditates on her hostile relationship with her ruthless father: "under that sky my father took me to the gate of Hell; the future was a flaming ball exhaling hostility, its pores covered with blood, dirt, and fear. His voiced soared, frightening enough to remove the hair dye from the neighbor's heads" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 59). Since her early years, Huda firmly challenged patriarchal oppression endeavouring to prove herself and gaining some freedom. When her father insulted and beat her, "You whore! What are doing on the roof at night?", she never thought of surrendering to her father's authority, "Speak, Huda, don't delay. Defile him, hunt him with your wickedness –you have no prey bigger than he", she encourages herself to respond (Mamdouh, 2013b, 60). She also adds:

> Between the stairs you used to threaten him. None of them knew him as you did. He was the first inspiration in your life. Open your eyes and look at him well. Hold his breath, and share with him nothing but plans of murder. For what was the celebration of the scuffle except to make your claws scratch more, your teeth bite more, your muscles attack more? […]. Damage his books and magazines, *read them and scatter their thoughts on him first*. Pour out on him this glory from your strong little heart. Go to your mother on your bended knees, open the gates for her and seat her as the queen of death and life; weep for her, for she is dying. (Mamdouh, 2013b, 60; emphasis added)

The other resolute female in the novel is the grandmother, who holds the reins of authority over her children, especially Huda's father, Jamil. She commands and occupies the highest position when it comes to making decisions. She is aware of the sanctity of her word and her children's duty to respect and comply with her decisions. The grandmother stands by Huda's mother, Iqbal, and defends her against her son, as she knows well that her son treats his wife unfairly.

The grandmother refuses to acknowledge her son's second marriage or even see his second wife's children. Whatever the reason behind the grandmother's decision and her sympathy for Huda's mother, whether it has been her revolt against the oppression of women, or her rejection of male domination especially as regards polygamy, the grandmother proves that she has her own stand, and demonstrates an ability to challenge patriarchal authority which is deeply ingrained in the traditions of Muslim communities. Iqbal has been terrorized and abused by her husband, and knows that, despite the powerful position her mother-in-law retains in the household, she still does not have the power that preserves her daughter-in-law's rights in a community where religious traditions authoritatively rule. Huda elaborates on her mother's miserable status in the household: "After pouring and serving the tea, she sat on the low wooden bench like a dejected sentry. She opened and closed, rinsed and dried, came and went. She finished everything slowly: cooking, eating, loving her husband" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 6).

Nonetheless, when Iqbal's marginalized existence was further threatened, she mustered an ample amount of courage to rebel against her tyrannical husband. When Jamil told her that she had to leave the house and go to her parents' house in Syria because he was going to marry another woman, Iqbal "jumped up suddenly as if stung". "She opened all the doors of the wardrobe and started there". Then she took out her husband's clothes, "his new uniforms, his ironed shirts, his hanging ties" which were "washed […] separately" and no one in the family "dared to touch them", and he "himself" took them to be ironed by Abu Ghanim who "ironed the clothes of the rich families" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 6, 49). Iqbal threw "one uniform after another onto the floor, scattered the shirts, and hurled down the ties like a genie the hot earth had produced, or who had flown out of an oven" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 47). Iqbal shrieked and "snatched the clothes and threw them away

from her". Then she turned about and "flushed with anger. These were the clothes of the long nights of waiting". She recalled the long years she had spent serving her husband with absolute loyalty. "This was the bed where she had learned he was a man, that he was the ruler, the father and the chosen one. She trod and leapt and wailed" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 48). Ultimately, she bent over, straightened up, took whatever was in front of her and tore it with her teeth and threw it on the floor. "I won't die twice, and if I die now, I'll die contented", she screamed (Mamdouh, 2013b, 49).

Another resounding revolt against patriarchy is led by Farida, Huda's paternal aunt. As was said before, Farida was abandoned by her husband Munir on her wedding day for no apparent reason. This incident has brought upon her excessive stress, which ultimately triggers a mental breakdown. Her behavior has become erratic and she has experienced several bouts of insanity. What she underwent was a calamity, not only to her social status, but to her femininity as well. She was neither free nor married; and had to remain like this until her youth and beauty faded away waiting for Munir's return.

After a long span of time, Munir suddenly showed up and came to visit Maarouf's house, as if nothing had happened. When Huda informed Farida of Munir's coming, Farida's face was "spiked with thorns; the whites of her eyes were bloodshot and half her tongue was hanging out", as if "the gates of Hell had opened". Farida leaped up, her face was "blazing", her lips were "dry" and her eyes were "bulging out". Huda recounts, my aunt "raced down. […] . Her voice was like my father's when he dragged me down the stairs by my braids" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 162). She was "dripping with agony", and her "piercing" voice hunted Munir through the house rooms. In few seconds, everything "turned to terror". Farida pulled Munir "by his tie" out of the water closet, "pushed him back inside and followed him". She shoved his head "into the toilet" and then "pushed him outside, grabbed him around the waist, and they ended up in the long corridor" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 163-164). Farida gathered her wrath and screeched with pain, "Even if I kill you with my own hands I won't be satisfied". During the brawl, even Huda, in an attempt to avenge her aunt and femininity in general, wanted to "reach out and beat" Munir herself. Farida "shone and whimpered and bent over as if she were in the market bath", which represents women's territory. She "stepped on him" […], got on top of him and sat on

him", and repeated, "I'm going to kill you with my own hand". Instantaneously, Farida opened Munir's legs, seized his leather belt, undid his trousers buttons and "stripped him naked" in front of Huda. Huda affirms, "Everything was before you now: the hunting rifle and the unicorn. […] what was between his legs looked like stale meat" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 164-165).

When Munir came round and pulled his trousers up, Farida went to him and "kicked him in the chest and forehead, stood over his head and spat on him" as if she were announcing her victory on patriarchy. Munir "closed his eyes, covered with spittle" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 165). Huda was astonished by Farida's actions and proud of her courage. She realized that her aunt was pushed to the point of overcoming her fear of patriarchal authority, to which she had been submissive for so long. "Let us forget fear and settle comfortably away from it. Only Farida beat it before her, and did not speak to it without mocking it. She approached her fear with natural muscles and found it worked in the end: to make Munir stagger, with the rest looking on" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 177).

For Huda, her aunt Farida "remained the virgin, lifting up the title and contemplating it day and night. She took off the black dress, washed her dusty skin, and proceeded to put on a seductive nightgown; madness returned to her face" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 177). The traumatic events Farida has gone through have greatly affected her later life. She "began to beat" Huda and her brother Adil, and the grandmother tolerated her behavior; because all that the grandmother wanted was her daughter, Farida, "to remain chaste". After a "long muteness", Farida's voice is back, "Dear, I have my voice back. Are you listening or not?" Farida exclaimed. Huda affirms that Farida has dramatically changed and her voice has become "a web of heavy pins, and her silence assaulted us". And then she adds, "she took up all my father's weapons and plunged them into our flesh and our bodies" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 178).

In *Naphtalene*, women do not only stand against men to express their rejection of absolute patriarchal authority, but they also firmly stand by men's side to revolt against the colonizer. The novel describes the demonstrations that the Iraqi people, in their various cultural and social groups, organized after the nationalization of the Suez Canal. It depicts

the repercussions of this significant event and its effects on the psychology of all the characters in the novel. Huda recounts, "my grandmother stood in front of the Friday Mosque with the women of the neighbourhood, praying for the young men as they passed before her holding their banners high. 'God protect you, my dears, and bring you safely home to your families'" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 167).

The grandmother was "bewildered, exclaiming as if she stood in the line of fire" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 167). Other women also played big roles to support the political movement. "Umm Suturi belted her wool cloak round her waist, stretched, and her black band round her head, trilling. She regulated the water spigots, set up five thick wooden posts and set pots and pails of clean water between them. She filled canvas sacks with loaves of oven-fresh bread" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 168). Demonstrators ate and drank as they passed before Umm Suturi shouting slogans. Rasmiya, the "needle lady" and the "neighbourhood nurse", prepared "a number of emergency surgical spirits, dressings, cotton, and iodine" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 168). The cheese seller, Abu Mahmoud, brought new types of cheese and left them "in the care of Umm Mahmoud", his wife, to serve them to the demonstrators. Blind Umm Aziz "brought big holiday plates dotted with sweets, calling out, 'Today everything is free for our boys'" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 168).

All the women in Mamdouh's novel take an active political part. In addition, the writer has sought to break the chain of masculinity, which renders the issues of political action and its consequences a monopoly in the world of men. What is constantly highlighted throughout the novel is a powerful feminist presence in the face of events, especially those that have brought about some transformation in the social, political and religious domains, which indicates the author's endeavour to give voice to Muslim women's concerns and religious, social and political roles.

5.3. Muslim Feminine Agency

Meriem El Haitami (2012) maintains that Islamic feminists who demanded religious authority have been successful and allured a "broad following across different social classes, as opposed to women's rights groups, which have limited outreach" (234). Despite the fact that many Islamic feminists, such as Asma Barlas (2019, 2005, 2016),

Amina Wadud (1999, 2006) and Fatima Mernissi (2009), via their appropriation of hermeneutical tools for interpreting religious texts, stand firmly against social and legal discrimination, some other Islamic feminists, though mainly in fictional works, go even further in an attempt to cultivate a "collective practice of piety that exists within patriarchal structures" (El Haitami, 2012, 235). In so doing, they endeavour to gain a more efficacious role in claiming Muslim women's rights.

Delineating grand female characters like that of the grandmother in Mamdouh's *Naphtalene* is, without doubt, an attempt on the part of the author to gain feminine legitimacy and, at the same time, redefine Islamic authority in a gender sensitive way. As long as feminine agency can be embodied in such a grand female character, Islamic feminists do not need to constantly resist the patriarchal authority openly. Adopting a hostility-free mode to express Muslim women's concerns, in turn, will blur and relocate the traditional structure of patriarchal authority by opening up new horizons for the foundation of divergent gendered models within Islam.

In her book, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, Saba Mahmood investigates women's agency, the role of piety in Muslim communities and the challenges they may pose to feminist studies. She argues that women's agency is "consubstantial with resistance to relations of domination, and the concomitant naturalization of freedom as a social ideal" (2005, 10). These two dimensions, according to some feminist scholars, like Chandra Mohanty (1991), Judith Butler (1999) and Wendy Brown (2018), reflect a profound feminist tension. However, it seems that Muslim women on the whole sustain traditional prototypes that keep them in subordinate positions, although they have somehow appropriated male dominating attitudes when presenting such characters.

On the other hand, women's involvement in the religious domain, as put by El Haitami (2012), raises plausible questions concerning the feminization of Islamic discourse. The most significant question is whether such a Muslim feminist discourse will enhance women's status or, on the opposite, will employ their voices to further reinforce the existing perceptions of discriminatory gender roles.

In Mamdouh's novel, the grandmother, Wafiqa, is delineated as a strong and resilient woman who had much grief. She "had lost three girls and a boy", all of whom died young (Mamdouh, 2013b, 82). Her husband, Ahmed Maarouf, drowned when his "boat sank in the Shatt al-Arab" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 119). However, "she did not grow weary; she did not grow angry" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 119). She acquires her determination and authority from her firm faith. She "stood before her prayer carpet all the time, and in between times, in heat, cold, and rain. Her only passion was for God. She whispered to herself prayers that never ended and drowned everyone in supplications, and divulged no secret" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 14). The grandmother "wasted no words. She freed herself from all her difficulties by referring them up to the Omnipotent Deity" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 15).

In the absence of patriarchal authority, represented by her son Jamil who is a police officer in Karabla, the grandmother becomes in charge of the household and rules over all family members. She functions as the protector who meets all the family needs and provides guidance. Due to her profound faith, balance and honesty, she has been highly respected, not only by the household members, but also by the whole neighbourhood. Huda comments:

> When she went to the market, all the shop owners opened up their secret rooms and new sacks of merchandise. They gave her the finest grains and the freshest vegetables, the whitest sugar, the purest rice and shelled lentils. They put all her groceries in clean bags and sent them after her. She did not have to pay the price of all she bought, nor did they put her name on their lists. She paid on the first of every month. She was never late, and never haggled or procrastinated. (Mamdouh, 2013b, 40)

As the household is usually characterized by the tyranny of Huda's father and the vulnerability of her mother, Huda and her brother have no one to look for shelter but their grandmother, who is portrayed as the most formidable personage in the family. She is "strong …, mighty…, [and] beautifil" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 36). Huda is attached to her pious grandmother and forges a close relationship with her. She, who learned lying early,

“I lied as easily as washing my face”, never lied to her respected grandmother (Mamdouh, 2013b, 183).

Being her grandmother the emblem of religiosity, Huda finds solace and tranquility with her. “Nestling up to her I mixed her good with my evil. I gave voice to all my sorrows and dreams, and never feared punishment from her”. Huda adds, “I might disguise myself in other clothes, but to her my bones did not lie; my soul could not deceive, and my head did not bow” (Mamdouh, 2013b, 40). In return, the grandmother is the only one who can sense the compassionate soul that Huda has inside. The grandmother states, “No one knows my Huda as I do” (Mamdouh, 2013b, 40). Moreover, it was the grandmother who named her Huda: “When you came, I chose your name, Huda—‘guidance’—because I said, perhaps God will guide her on the true path” (Mamdouh, 2013b, 157). Huda’s relationship with her grandmother Wafiqa differs from all her other relationships. It is characterized by mutual love and admiration and great intimacy. Huda states how she usually resorts to her grandmother, particulary after being severely punished by her brutal father:

> She hugged me, her arms tight around me. I kissed her and hugged her, burying my head beneath her ribs. I felt her belly, her soft breasts, and her long, narrow neck. I raised my face to her calm, sorrowful, inspired face, which never scolded when I was bad, but which was always responsive when I was sorry. (Mamdouh, 2013b, 39)

Huda’s tender grandmother represents the religion and home in which she seeks refuge from all the forms of injustice and harsh treatment that females receive in patriarchal societies where traditions, rather than religion, rule tyrannically. The grandmother, then, plays the role of the surrogate father and mother, and above all of a positive model to follow.

Mamdouh described the grandmother in a God-like manner in an attempt to refute the stereotypical resemblance between God and male, who is, unlike women, often associated with rationality, moderation and the ability to lead. “This grandmother was the center of the circle”, toward her all the eyes of the people in the family turn. The author here places the grandmother in a deity position, and the people around her “not know where

she concealed her strength" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 36). Huda keeps on describing her grandmother's angelic characteristics:

> When she walked her footsteps were light and hardly audible. When she spoke, her voice was clothed in caution and patience, and when she was silent everyone was bewildered by her unannounced plans. She was strong without showing signs of it, mighty without raising her voice, beautiful without finery. She was beautiful from her modest hem to her silver braids. She was slim, of medium height, a narrow black band round her head, whose ends dangled by her thin braids. She was light-skinned. I never saw anyone with a white complexion like hers. It was a white between bubbly milk and thick cream. Her eyes were gray with dark blue, wild green, and pure honey-colored rays. (Mamdouh, 2013b, 36)

Mamdouh, through her protagonist Huda, further emphasizes the heavenly attributes the grandmother is allotted. She "was a well-organized woman; she loved justice and set great store by it" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 36). The grandmother has the authority that none of the other women in the family have, regardless of their status and affiliation. In traditional Muslim Arab communities, it is common that men should enjoy absolute authority to rule over women, regardless of their position. Men are usually looked at as kings and even God-like by birth. In her descriptive style, Mamdouh has delineated her male characters in accordance with prevailing traditions. The grandfather is depicted "like an Ottoman pasha" who "wore a tessaled fez" (as if it were a crown); and "walked around with a superior air". When he went out "everyone scuttled out of his way" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 36).

His son Jamil, the father, was "walking like a king". He "never bumped into anyone or greeted anyone with his hand movement". His skeleton is "perfectly erect". Whenever his family "saw him coming or leaving he would change from being the *image of a father* to a mighty God" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 34; emphasis added). However, Jamil submits to his mother's authority, and this in spite of the fact that he keeps all the household members on a tight leash.

The relationship between the grandmother and her son seems to be quite traditional, as it is based on mutual respect and son-parents obedience. Jamil is the one who always gives the orders to be carried out by those who inhabit the household, except the grandmother, whose presence changes him. When Jamil saw his mother, "he calmed down. He loved and honored her, and weakened in her presence" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 34). Nonetheless, the grandmother never confronts Jamil in the presence of his children; this "was her way of pacifying him" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 35).

According to Francisco Perales and Gary Bouma (2019), as long as most religions, particularly the three major ones, namely, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, do not sanction the violence practiced on women, they are "one potent source of patriarchal orientations" (324). Burn and Busso (2005) also affirm that cultural factors, mainly those related to religion, have had a considerable impact on gender roles. Mikołajczak and Pietrzak (2014), for their part, believe that it is religion that explicitly instills gendered stereotypes, because the link between religion and patriarchal politics "might be direct", despite the fact that there are other indirect associations, such as "the result of broader values incorporated into religious teachings" (387).

Other scholars, such as Roccas (2005) and Saroglou and Cohen (2011), have also stated that religiosity is linked to a hierarchy of traditional principles intended to ensure stability and certainty. Such attachment to traditional values can "affect how one responds to norm adherence and norm violation and, more specifically, to individuals who comply with or violate social norms" (Mikołajczak & Pietrzak, 2014, 387). This, in turn, reinforces and maintains the traditional patriarchal domination that regulates gender roles in the social system; and it may also justify why all the major religions have male Gods in spite of the fact that they honour women and in theory ascribe them equal importance.

To further elucidate how women's social roles are positively and negatively restricted, Glick and Fiske's (1996, 2001) views should also be taken into consideration. They believe that looking at women as having both positive attributes (such as caring and warmth) and negative ones (such as unreliability and manipulation) simultaneously confirms the social inequality between men and women. Such a perception about women

being essentially different from men, as Mikołajczak and Pietrzak put it, renders them "more or less adequate to fill particular roles in society" (2014, 387).

Thus, what is more significant in delineating the grandmother character is that although she is the emblem of religion and the only one who has the authority to punish Jamil, the ultimate embodiment of patriarchy, she cannot put an end to his tyranny and domination in the household due to traditional patriarchal values. She was the only person who "rebuked [Huda's] father and scolded him behind [his children's] backs, suddenly setting upon him, taking all her time, scattering him and tearing him apart, exposing him anew to [them]" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 36). Nevertheless, when Jamil decided to marry again, the grandmother had no authority to stop him from doing so, although in an attempt to defend her first "loyal" daughter-in-law and her grandchildren, she did her best to punish Jamil.

The grandmother vowed that Jamil's new wife, Nuriya, would never step into the household. "You have not seen her and you never will", the grandmother pledged to Huda (Mamdouh, 2013b, 54). She "did not advance or retreat in her decision: 'Listen Abu Adil,[3] as long as I have breath in my body, Nuriya will not set a foot in this house". She also told Jamil: "she is your wife-fine. The past is hers and the present is yours, and what comes after is your own business" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 55). Jamil is rendered vulnerable against the authority of his mother, whose curse blemished his life: the state that finally "drove him into madness" "began with drinking and ended with drunkenness" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 54-55). His voice rose in "grief and sorrow": "Mama! are you telling me to divorce her?", asked Jamil. He tried his best to persuade the grandmother to accept his new wife in the household. "I've lived with her, and she loves me and is *very afraid of me*. In few months she'll have the baby. For the child's sake let her come here and kiss your hands. Please, Mama, God bless you". However, the grandmother "did not reply, or turn around; she only looked down" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 55, emphasis added).

Paradoxically, in accordance with patriarchal traditions, the grandmother, who has firmly demanded the right of Jamil's first wife, aligns with patriarchy against Jamil's

[3]Abu Adil means Adil's father, a nickname used to formally address people with their elder male child.

second wife by inciting him to take away her rights. She asks Jamil to abandon his second wife Nuriya and marry another woman. “Jamouli [Jamil], why don’t you remarry? Leave Nuriya to her children and come here” (Mamdouh, 2013b, 187).

Unlike the common relationship in traditional Muslim families between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, usually marked by hostility and inconsistency, the grandmother has been sympathetic toward Iqbal. She loves her as if she were her daughter. When Iqbal confronted Jamil, and for fear that Jamil might hurt her, the grandmother “cradled [Huda’s] mother and hugged her tightly, prayed over her, and pulled her by arm. ‘God is great, my daughter Iqbal, God protect you, God bless you, now let’s go, let’s get out of there before’”. But Iqbal interrupted screaming, “What will happen now? He will kill me for tearing his clothes. I don’t care! I’m dead! I don’t have any blood left!” (Mamdouh, 2013b, 50). The grandmother is very kind to Iqbal, and always talks well behind her back. She tenderly tells Huda, “You and Adil are the apple of my eye—you’re the children of that dear sweet woman who has never said an unkind word. Poor thing, Iqbal!” (Mamdouh, 2013b, 39).

In return, Iqbal admires the grandmother and loves her as if she were her real mother. Before leaving the house, after Jamil told her to go back to Syria, Iqbal maintains, “Oh, Mama, who will wash Adouli’s [Adil’s] hair now? Where will I go now? Jamouli [Jamil] is trying to drive me mad before I die, and I swear to God his dear mother is the only reason I have stayed” (Mamdouh, 2013b, 47). It seems that through the grandmother character, Mamdouh has been striving to make the voice of true Islam heard; the Islam that reflects the teachings and commands of God, rather than the customs and traditions that patriarchal authority has imposed upon the system whereby people, and especially women, are governed.

Huda maintains, my grandmother “dazzled us every time she told us, in a clear, distant voice, as if coming from an abandoned cellar, a story of my father which she had never told before” (Mamdouh, 2013b, 36). Through the character of the grandmother, the author denounces the reality of oppressive patriarchal authority. “She wiped the dust from the photo album and opened it. At the beginning was the picture of our venerable,

terrifying, handsome, harsh, skeptical grandfather, who was in love with her, was jealous, and who never once in his life told her 'I love you'" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 36). Again this excerpt testifies to the violence inflicted against women.

Though they rule over all the family members and are given the upper hand, neither Jamil nor his father are portrayed as the protective Muslim men who appear in the Qur'an as "the guardians of women" (Qur'an 4:34). When her husband Jamil abandoned her after serving him for many years, Iqbal, "touch[ed] the Qur'an, fondl[ed] it with her hand and [said], 'they left me in your care. You beat me and cursed me and made me have tuberculosis'" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 46). On the contrary, Mamdouh has introduced the figure of the grandmother as a source of protection and support, not only for her grandchildren, but also for all the people she knows. She compensates Huda and her brother for their deprivation of both paternal and maternal nurturance.

> She tamed us one after the other, without our shedding a single drop of blood. She shared her thoughts with everyone, trained us without threats, and took us to her bosom without menace. She prayed over us when we were ill, and fetched us from the end of the road if we ran away. She stood guard at the gates to our souls when we erred. (Mamdouh, 2013b, 40)

The grandmother has also defended her daughter-in-law and supported all the powerless and helpless people in the neighbourhood. Nonetheless, the entrenchment of patriarchal traditions in Muslim communities prevents her from enjoying the supreme authority that would enable her to settle matters at will, in particular regarding women and their rights. Moreover, by attributing religiosity, piety, justice, moderation, strength and reverence to a feminine character like the grandmother, Mamdouh endeavours to convey the message that religion, logic, rationality and the ability to rule with justice are not the preserve of men as is constantly propagated by patriarchy.

5.4. Mamdouh's Descriptive Style in *Naphtalene*

Descriptive writing is simply defined as the writing that develops images through the use of "precise sensory words, phrases" and some literary devices such as metaphor or onomatopoeia (McCarthy, 1998, 34). The very term suggests "vivid story paragraphs that

help us see settings […] of city streets, of passages that show us people acting, speaking, and feeling in ways that make them believable and real to us" (McCarthy, 1998, 5). In writing fiction, in particular, description is frequently used to clarify what is happening (Maguire, 2018, par. 1).

Unlike cinema and theatre, which are brought to dynamic life through the skills of their actors, directors, editors and many other effects such as music and lights, fictional writing depends primarily on the writer's talent to create worlds that have never existed and to delineate characters who have never lived; yet such invented worlds and characters should have the ability to captivate readers and have their emotions involved. Although some critics have considered fictional description as "purely ornamental, redundant, or even irrelevant", it has always played a significant role in literature (Lopes, 1995, 3)

According to Maguire (2018), description can be also used to have control of pace, mood and tension, and to "provide the panoramic images that form both the background and foreground for the action; obscure clues, suggest motivations, illuminate emotion and state of mind in both character and reader" (par. 2). Nevertheless, the effective roles that description plays in writing are often overlooked by readers: when it is employed, description should not be included in such a way that calls attention to itself. Instead, it should implicitly convey messages and information through the characters' eyes and attitudes. The information provided in the description will on the whole be of great importance to answer the reader's how, where, when and why in relation to the events, places and characters of the story (see Murtad, 1998; Zeitooni, 2002).

From the very beginning of Mamdouh's *Naphtalene*, as in most of her fiction, readers are confronted with descriptive passages that may at first seem to oppose narrative cohesion and fluidity (Kadhum, 2012, par. 3). However, this never happens, as the author is quite proficient in conveying the imagined to the reader as if it were real, particularly what is related to women and their femininity. Since the most frequent descriptions are about character and place, some light is going to be shed on these two elements specifically.

5.4.1. Mamdouh's Treatment of Character

Character is not only one of the pillars of the novel, but it is also a cornerstone in its construction. Its importance and vitality lies in its carrying out the narrative tasks that are interlinked and integrated in the text. Character is considered as the only element at which all other formal elements intersect, including the temporal and spatial coordinates necessary for the growth and perpetuation of the narrative discourse (Yaqtin, 2016, 89). Some critics go even further to define the novel as the story wherein the characters meet one another, and develop relationships (Bahrawi, 1990; Wellek & Warren, 1956; Zola, 2015).

Significantly enough, in almost all Mamdouh's fiction, the main characters are always women, which thus gives them a voice. On the other hand men, who represent patriarchal authority, are constantly introduced as secondary characters. According to Odeh, character is presented descriptively in Mamdouh's fiction as a space consisting of a group of protrusions with various shapes (2016, 71). What is observed in Mamdouh's novels is that most of her characters, especially the main ones, are characters that gradually transform from one state to another. Such a metamorphosis renders these characters influential and influenced by the surrounding events.

Huda, the leading character in Mamdouh's novel, is introduced to the reader as a young girl at the beginning, to then become an adolescent. Huda changes from an awfully naughty, boisterous and non-conformist girl to a young woman who takes care of the household. She is portrayed as a mischievous and rebellious young girl who is not "afraid of anyone" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 26). Her sharp tongue and daring nature bring her too much trouble. "She has been impossible from the day she was born. Remember when we were giving her *Khishkhash*[4] and she wasn't yet forty days old. God help us when she comes of age!", her aunt says (Mamdouh, 2013b, 28). Unlike other girls in the neighbourhood, Huda is a recalcitrant "tomboy" and a "devil". Talking to his second wife, Nuriya, Jamil maintains, "Huda is a boy. She is not afraid of me or anyone else" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 188).

[4]Khishkhash, also known as "opium poppy", is a mild opiate.

Before moving into adolescence, Huda could not be kept in a restricted and small place like school, which depressed her with its high walls, dim classes and "dark paint peeling", where "the benches were narrow", "the blackboards were smudged", and where the boys and girls were "crammed together in them, four by four" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 98). She once confessed, "I did not like school", and this is why she used to play truant, skip classes and consequently fail or "miserably" pass the final exams. When she approached her twelfth birthday, Huda decided to move into the empty room of her mother. She stood before her grandmother, her aunt Farida and her brother Adil and announced her moving into puberty, "I want to sleep and study in my mother's room. I'm grown up now and I want to study by myself" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 98).

Her moving into her mother's room was also an empowering act for her. "The first night I could not sleep. I was not afraid. No ghosts faltered on their way to me, nor was I afflicted by nostalgia. I was gaining my mother for myself, and gathering the power to challenge my father", Huda comments (Mamdouh, 2013b, 100). Huda does not want to be another version of her submissive mother, who endured years of devotion and selflessness in serving her family to be simply dismissed by her hardhearted husband for being sick and unable to bear more children.

The circumstances Huda has passed through have had dramatic influence on her life. As a result, not only has her soul aged, but the way she behaves and looks at life has also changed. Transiting from childhood into early adolescence has brought about fundamental changes in Huda's life. As an adolescent, Huda is no longer hit, "No one had hit me for long months. They said I had grown, and it was wrong to hit a girl who had reached puberty" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 145). Puberty, in a conservative Muslim community, has had a great influence on young Muslim females.

Huda was not frightened when she saw "drops of blood on wide, unbleached clothing", because she had been familiar with the scene of her blood "flowing from [her] nose, legs, and mouth". It was her first blood, "the exclusive possession of Officer Jamil". Yet, the puberty blood she saw in her panties "would be [hers] alone". Huda was frightened when she saw it on account of what she had been told by her grandmother and her aunt

Widad. They said: "when you become of age, you should fear men, all men. You can be a mother or a goddess" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 145). What further terrified her in relation to the blood is "masters' complexions: Jamil, Munir, Abu Iman, and …" who "all came out of the secret suffocating rooms and began to spray [her] with hoses of fire" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 145).

Such transformation demanded that she should be more cautious in her actions; and it also induced her to be more responsible, both as a student at school and as a housekeeper. Huda became in charge of the house when her grandmother was out. She remarks, "It was the first time I was the lady of the house. [...]. I had the keys to all rooms in my hands. I opened them up and stood before the steps to the roof" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 158-159). Huda felt strong and triumphant. She gained the keys of all the rooms prohibited to her previously; and she also had the authority to ascend up to the roof which had given her much trouble in the past.

Ultimately, she realized that coming to terms with her father was a must. Visiting her father in Karbala prison, where he worked, offered her the opportunity to closely see the miserable conditions of his job as police officer in such a place. It also softened the image of her cruel father in her mind. However, Huda could not forget the horror and pain she had experienced at her father's hand in the past, although the way he now treated his family had changed dramatically. She observes, "My father became effusive with his compassion: he became tender and indulgent. But my imagination had not killed his old cruel self, and my dreams had not conjured up such an honorable gentleman" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 184). Paradoxically, Huda's fear of her father in the past is replaced with a fear for him, particularly when his health deteriorated, "You had never known him to be so weak and in such a state. We feared for him more than before and our spirits were troubled" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 185).

Huda's father, Jamil, is undoubtedly presented as a secondary character in the novel, although he also evolves and changes. In the first chapters of the novel, Jamil is introduced as a neurotic person who deals with his wife and children in an extremely brutal way. He is a bully whose tempter is constantly violent. In a police uniform and with a

pistol, his frightening appearance instigates terror, not only in the household, but in the whole neighbourhood as well. “His shadow, his name, and his voice went through us. We huddled together like terrified puppies”, even “Mahmoud’s top stopped when [Jamil] appeared”, Huda describes the awe she, her brother Adil and her young boyfriend Mahmouh experience when they see her father, whose tyranny destroys the peace of the household and fills its atmosphere with agitation and tension (Mamdouh, 2013b, 30).

However, he turned into a dramatically different person when he married Nouriya, his second wife, who bore him more children to further increase the burden of his life. He abandoned his sharp nature and gave the impression of being weak and compassionate. When he came to see his family in Baghdad, it was obvious that “his eyes were lifeless, as if exhausted by hatred and rage. He did not take Adil in his arms, or call out to either of us. He was not tender, he was dejected and quiet” (Mamdouh, 2013b, 179). When Huda “slid down to the floor” to unlace his “always shiny […] high black boots” as she always did, she found out that he was wearing ordinary shoes instead; and when she began to pull off his socks, he “pulled them back up and said, ‘Thank you, little Huda’”. This is the first time he thanks Huda and addresses her with such kindness (Mamdouh, 2013b, 31,147).

Huda continues to describe the new version of her father, “He took me by my hand and pulled me to his side, and put his arms round me. My tears streamed down, and my father cried as well”. He then took away his hands from her and raised them to his head, “covered his face, and the sound of his sobbing grew louder and hung in the room’s hot air” (Mamdouh, 2013b, 147). Huda elaborates on her father’s transformed state:

> This was a face I had never seen before, and all those moments and old images drew us closer together. His haggard face, the delicate strands of gray more beautiful in his hair, the despotic appearance that aroused our aversion and hatred. These were his tears; he had not borrowed them from someone else, and he was not covering them with a handkerchief. He did not display them, and we could only see them up close. If only Iqbal knew; if only Wafiqa knew; if only the whole neighbourhood knew that Officer Jamil was covering us with his wailing and his charm. […] No pistol with which to humiliate. No whip scourged our skin. […] We squirmed into

> his embrace and he hugged and kissed us on the neck and hair, smelled our ears and mouths, and a tear fell from his eye on to our hands. […]. He stood us up in front of him and looked into our faces, never taking his eyes off us. He dared, he dared us, and got to know us; all that was before us were tears and sorrow and fright. My father had changed. We were surprised to see he had changed. (Mamdouh, 2013b, 147-148)

5.4.2. Place and its Significance

Milford Jeremiah (2000) maintains that place is the term that describes the setting wherein "issues of writing and other language related skills are housed and discussed" (23). According to Curtin (2021), a strong sense of place is of great importance for the reader to be able to make an "imaginative leap into another world, whether that world is in the past, present or future" (par. 1). Place is one of the main components of narrative structure. In the literary world, Jeremiah (2000) states, place is normally integrated with events and their time to form what is known as the social context or social setting.

In the novel under analysis, Mamdouh focuses on place at the very beginning to show its relationship to Muslim women and the way they are oppressed. In the first paragraph of the novel, Huda, the narrator, describes the place where the women and children of her family reside as "the detention camp", which indicates how much they are restricted by patriarchal authority. Then, Huda calls to mind some other real places, such as the women's public bath in al-A'damiyya, which "was far" from Huda's home. On their trip to the bath where women enjoy some kind of freedom away from the patriarchal eye, Huda and her aunt "went through alleys and emerged in streets". They "turned to the right and then to the left, and from the beginning of the street came the smells of women and children, mothers and grandmothers". In front of the "great door [of the bath], painted a dark gray, the boys played marbles". And in the four corners of the bath, "black wooden benches were set". From inside, "warm breezes blew […]. The broad meters of the bath became a source of play and activity". "The first place was not very warm"; yet, when Huda and her aunt "went into the second room, the clouds of vapor were rising" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 22-23).

Some elements are used to highlight the charateristics of the place and its construction, especially colours. The presence of colour in the description of a place in any literary text has different implications (see Alboali, 2002). This is evidenced in the novel in the use of the dark colour of the door and the black colour of the benches. The author has described the women's bath with these two colours as they are usually reported as "neutral, weak, and even as a no-man's land" (Clarke & Costall, 2008, 408); they are depressing and denote sadness as well (Adams & Osgood, 1973; Wexner, 1954). In this way, the author describes the suffocating women's world in conservative Muslim communities.

Huda, the narrator, describes the females' public bath in al-A'damiyya relying on both external and internal description. She starts from the outside and what is all around to then focus on its inside, the psychological, social and political dimensions related to women who frequent such a place. "You looked with loathing at all these details. Women, all naked, as if they had just been raped or tortured", Huda obseves. The floor of the bath was "hot as a grill", and women there shrieked and cried out to one another. The "boarders were open" in the Iraqi baths, there were "no partitions", and the only language in which every woman conversed was "physical touch" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 24).

Huda portrays the women as if they "had all been detained beyond the sky and today they had descended to the floor of the bath" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 24). In their territory, i.e. females' bath, women feel free of patriarchal restrictions. They talk about eveything, children, husbands and neighbours. Huda comments, "there were no great scandals in our street, not any great abominations in the houses". She adds, "The men intensified their glands in obedience to women, and the women waited for their husbands on the benches, on the iron beds, on the ground, on high roofs, half asleep, half dead, half … half" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 25).

In her autobiograpgy *Alajnabiya* (The Foreigner) (2013a), Mamdouh has given a detailed account of the psychological impact real places can have on her and the other characters in this novel. The women's public bath is among the most significant places due to the privacy women enjoy there. She recalls her memories and experiences there:

I think it was there that my precious hunting expeditions began. The bath was not a space of hot inchs, it was a feminist continent full of confusion and unpredictability. Through the hot water and suds of soap, bodies were burning before me. Everyone was in that space. They were drawn to the tricks of the body sways, the astonishment of instincts, and the rights to divulge secrets. Ultimately, the bath was a very private information center. It was the most dangerous directorate of general intelligence for everything that happened in the street, prison, hospital or marital bed.

It was through the bath that the unrecorded documents were written to control the fates of girls who were about to reach puberty or those who were intimidated by the title of spinster. Indeed, from there I started to feel puffed, and the arts of play, imagination and deception began to take shape, between the celebrations of water, food, and extravagance. I did not write about them by casting a curse, because the bath reflected a kind of Hell, but rather from the necessity of engineering these bodies with a sense of fun and gentleness. Whenever the sweat of the bodies evaporated, a free substance was formed in front of me, and I watched with premeditation and suspense, bodies resurrected and others on the verge of death, leaving only words in the head, and this is the only consolation for writing. The women I saw about to dance and fly through the cracks of the flames were completely unfree. Their movements suffered from spasticity and their joints were affected by rheumatism.

Some of them smelled of manliness, which could be called a kind of rebellion. Others were shy, or so they played a role in obtaining the approval of mothers and grandmothers who used to classify everyone through lineage, wealth and modesty. And some took the plunge and got themselves in homosexual relations, as an expression of a crude and mechanical rejection of their husbands' sexual lust, and an attempt to find an alternative solution. Thus, man becomes the taboo whom they were not able to address, respond to his temptation or touch him, so he turns to the private essence, that is, the hidden truth (Mamdouh, 2013a, 32; my translation from Arabic).

Mamdouh introduces the women's bath to make it possible for women to fully express their concerns without being influenced by patriarchal, religious and traditional authorities. It is there, in the bath, that Huda learned how to shout "No" though she heard many "Yeses" from everyone else under men's domination. Huda describes another significant and historical place which reflects the religious history of the city. It is Abu Hanifa Mosque, one of the most religious sites in Baghdad. It was built around the tomb of Abu Hanifaan-Nu'man, an 8th-century Muslim-Sunni Imam who holds great reverence in most Muslim communities.

As with the public women's bath, the narrator starts describing the outer look of the mosque and its external characteristics. Its main gate "was to the east". It was a "rectangle of carved yellow bricks, bordered by inscriptions cut into their blue surface". The "four-sided clock" of the mosque "stood to the north of the door". One of the four clocks "counted the hours from sundown" while the other three clocks "reckoned the time from moon". Being unique in its beauty and form, the clock is considered to be one of the landmarks of the historic city of Baghdad. In addition to the clock there were "two domes and a minaret on the east side", the first was "over the sanctuary of the praying area", while the second was over the tomb of Abu Hanifa". The outer enclosure of the domes was renovated with "yellow brick inlaid with blue tile from Karbala, a holy city in the south west of Baghdad. The tiles were "inscribed with some of the ninety-nine beautiful names of God". Huda comments, "When I lifted my head up to the blue minaret, I heard the sound of the beating of turtledoves' wings and those of gray and white pigeons as they took straws for nest building and flew higher, alighting on the top to sleep there", and enjoy the peace and warmth of the holy place (Mamdouh, 2013b, 105).

The narrator refers to a special kind of architecture that is famous for building graves, mosques, shrines and other religious places in Iraq; and such places are designed and decorated in a distinctive way. In addition to the cultural knowledge they provide, such descriptions offer insights into the psyche of their inhabitants, their way of life, and how they deal with nature (al-Nasir, 1986, 17).

Like other people in the neighbourhood, Huda headed to Abu Hanifa Mosque on specific religious occasions; "I ran, fell down, picked myself up, cried, and struck my face with my hand. I was thinking of no one". There, she stood with the "confused crowd" of the neighbourhood. The long rows "pushed and shoved". They were "bending, their arms and legs". At Abu Hanifa Mosque, people's voices "mingled together in prayer and supplication: 'God, have mercy', they cried as they revolved around the tomb with its silver tome and scalloped columns". Huda also describes how people in their different ages tied "green and white scraps of fabric to the window of the tomb", how their hands rose "like flowers scattered by a storm" as they were praying to God, and how they "kissed the columns" as if they were "suckling breasts" and their bodies "craved blessing" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 91).

As many critics have argued (see Bachelard, 2006; Mortad, 2005; Saleh, 1997), place has always played a fundamental role in fiction, not only as a catalyst for the historical, socio-economic and religious context, but also for the author's background and personal experience. Similarly, it is often through place that the reader understands the psyche of the characters, their behaviour and their ways of thinking, as it represents a network of relationships, visions, and viewpoints that fuse to construct the fictional space in which characters develop.

Huda spent her formative years in al-A'damiyya; she did not only develop a close rapport with its people and traditions, but was also intimately connected with her neighbourhood and its places. Besides the vivid portrayal of the carpenter, the cheese seller, the butcher, the baker, the Jewish seamstress, and other ordinary people in the neighbourhood, Huda's story includes lavish descriptions of different places, such as the women's public bath and ancient mosque of Abu Hanifa previously discussed, and the Tigris River and the traditional bazaar. They are all part of Huda's world and her personal history. However, the developmental plan of the government, which led to the demolishment of the neighbourhood, prompted a sense of termination to Huda's departure from her original place.

Such a depiction also reflects the author's exile and the way she has transcribed this very experience in her novels. Like Mamdouh herself, Huda desperately needed to preserve the memories of her past as she was overwhelmed by nostalgia. Huda hankers after her past, "The brightly colored beads of childhood scattered—stolen, gilded with light touches, longings, and delegations of tears, and the spongy mud we washed our feet with as we played sliding down slopes or streams" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 172).

Prior to their departure, Huda ponders, "After six years or six months, take up the axes and chop up the flesh of memories. Do not shout or resist. Begin the parting now, but do not think of farewells" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 183). Moving in a new house, Huda showed no interest, "looked in silence and spat on the ground". In an attempt to relieve their resentment of the new place and their nostalgia for their original place, the grandmother told Huda and her brother, Adel, that they would "grow up anew here". However, Huda reflects, "They took us to the new house. You did not examine anything, not the guest room or the guests of this pain, not the little dead garden". Even the trees were "lined the street in a different pattern" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 183).

It was too hard for Huda to abandon the place where she spent her childhood. Even painful memories were more pleasant than moving to a totally different place. She stood "in front of the dirt dam, pointing to the pessimistic Tigris" and looking at all people "whom she loved" there. She "went past [her] old dress and ugliness of others and said, 'This far and no further'" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 182). She preferred the cruelty with which her father treated her in their old house to her life in the new one: "Come and let me into your world. Give me the instruments with which you once beat me. Beat me, father, use electricity cables. Beat me, then sew up my wounds". She then adds, "Beat me and leave your marks on my flesh and face. Beat me and I will obey you a little" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 182).

Baghdad and al-A'damiyya with its buildings, alleys, people and life are vividly present in Mamdouh's *Naphtalene*. In addition to the detailed description of Baghdad and its places, Mamdouh has also been concerned with the portrayal of life in these places in

order to make the reader acquainted with that reality. The novel depicts an Iraqi, or more specifically Baghdadi, world in which women play a fundamental role.

Taking into consideration that the events of the novel took place in the late 1950s, i.e. the last years of the Iraqi monarchy, the author has also incorporated many national, regional and historical details of the period. As was said before, the most influential events of that time were the Iraqis' demonstrations in Baghdad in opposition to the monarchy, the British and the corrupted government supported by the colonizers. Mamdouh has also referred to the Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser and his national prayers on the radio, his promotion of Arab nationalism and popularity in Iraq. She has provided some details about the nationalization of the Suez Canal and its impact on people, in addition to the names of writers, books, magazines and other publications which were very popular in the Arab Muslim world. "On the other corner stood old shelves upon which books were arranged: Dar al-Hilal editions, the *Reader's Digest* in Arabic, and the novels of Jurji Zaidan, Taha Hussein, Tawfiq al-Hakim, and al-Manfaluti, and issues of Egyptian magazines such as *al-Musawwar*, *Akher Sa'a* and *al-Kawakibi*" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 45-46).

Despite the inclusion of significant political and historical events in her novel, they do not take the upper hand, nor obscure Huda's evolution as a character. Yet, the novel wonderfully shows the author's love for Baghdad, its places and the life of its people in the 1950s. In other words, the novelist is immersed in the language and description of the Iraqi environment. She employs the former to perfectly express the latter.

Mamdouh often digresses in her descriptions by including so many details that some of them may seem to be banal minutiae. For instance, her inclusion of trivial details such as, "The boys and girls wore cheap clothes, and their shoes were scruffy. Their socks were uneven – one high, the other low" (Mamdouh, 2013b, 126). Nonetheless, such details do not distract the reader from Huda's portrayal of Baghdad, which vibrantly holds on its residents' hearts and minds. In Mamdouh's hands, Baghdad and its people become inescapable, at least, for a while.

This study has aimed at throwing light upon the peculiarity and competence of Muslim feminists' fiction, especially as regards the works written by diasporic authors. And what is special in these writings is the amount of freedom the author enjoys in the alternative place, together with the presence of firsthand experiences, places, people, and the conflict which differences inevitably bring about. The writer endeavours to retrieve the missed place by relying on memory and the imagination, that is, by re-writing history and trying to heal the wounds resulting from leaving one's home behind.

Conclusion

The main focus of this study has been the different positions embraced by four novelists who have been categorized as Muslim feminists, and the way in which these novelists reflect Islamic feminist hypotheses in their novels in order to address women's questions in contemporary Muslim societies. The novels analyzed have been Iqbalunnisa Hussain's *Purdah and Polygamy: Life in an Indian Muslim Household,* Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero,* Leila Abuolela's *Minaret* and *Alia Mamdouh's Naphtalene: A Novel of Baghdad.* In an attempt to approach the problem of Muslim women's oppression effectively, the current study has tried to analyze these texts from different Muslim feminist perspectives. My intention behind bringing these four novelists together has been to consider their similarities and differences in the way they approach women's struggle, and to show that they tackle the topic differently, in accordance with the Islamic culture they belong to, the peculiarity of their societies and their commitment to Islam in creedal terms.

After identifying the most appropriate critical theory to accomplish this analysis, namely, Islamic Feminism, the first introductory chapter outlined the main feminist waves and trends in both the western and eastern worlds. It also included a more detailed explanation of the main feminist theories as developed by the most outstanding Islamic feminist branches. The purpose of this chapter was to investigate the origins, development and ramification of feminism into divergent hues and, more particularly, to offer a brief account of the origins of Islamic feminism. For Muslims, the Qur'an is considered to be the main source from which they derive injunctions, not only for their spirituality, faith and belief, but also for the principles that rule their social, political, economic and cultural life.

One of the first things to acknowledge is the fact that the interpretation of the Qur'an and other Islamic sources, such as the reported sayings and deeds of Prophet Mohammed, were monopolized by men. Muslim feminists accused men of interpreting Islamic sources in their favour, maliciously attributing sayings to the Prophet Mohammed that he had never pronounced. Therefore, most Muslim feminists demanded a sex-sensitive re-interpretation of all religious sources, especially the ones that are related to women's

status and their rights in Muslim societies. These feminists were also divided into those who claimed that traditions must be taken into account when interpreting religious texts, and those who demanded a complete departure from them. The latter based their theories on the grounds that traditions do not fit the reality of contemporary societies, and that they often contradict their principles. As for the former, they were satisfied with the traditional interpretations and stood firmly against re-interpreting Islamic sources, as this might include extraneous ideas that would desecrate conservative Muslim societies. In accordance with dominant patriarchal interpretations, they also believed that women must abide by the dominant authority of men, who offer them protection in return.

Thus, the first chapter shed light, not only on the various branches of feminism that sprang in different cultures, but also on the motives behind the emergence of different feminist movements within the same culture in order to meet different needs. In addition, it highlighted the relevance and idiosyncrasy of Islamic feminism. It is obvious that all feminist movements are based on the same basic principle, namely, the demand for women's rights, and that, although this is what fundamentally brings them all together and inspires one another, their differences must also be taken into consideration. Islamic feminism should be regarded as an important branch of global feminism, whose goals can also be compatible with the preservation of the most relevant Muslim principles.

Like other feminist movements, the Islamic one is divided into different branches. Such variety of Muslim feminist thoughts made it possible to investigate each of the aforementioned novels taking into consideration these differences and without imposing one exclusive perspective on them all. Each of the four considered novelists placed their respective novel in a different context, which the novelist herself experienced and internalized. This diversity of Muslim contexts can in turn expose readers, particularly non-Muslim ones, to a variety of Muslim modes and voices. The novels analyzed could be regarded as samples taken from different Muslim communities that therefore allow for an inclusive study of women's conditions in the Muslim world, which will enable, both Muslim and non-Muslim readers/critics, to compare Islamic feminism with other global feminisms.

The main reason why Islamic feminism was chosen as the main theoretical framework is the inapplicability of western feminist theories to Muslim contexts. Contrary to most Muslim feminists, who believe that following the real Islam ensures women's well-being, western feminists often look at Islam as the most misogynist religion. Thus, the inability of western feminists to understand the importance of religion in Muslim communities further widens the gap between western and Muslim feminists when it comes to demanding women's rights. Moreover, the utterly secular attitudes of most western feminists, which often contradict Islamic values, were also among the main obstacles that blocked the way to any kind of cooperative feminist endeavour.

In addition to Islamic feminism, other theories, such as some put forward by psychoanalysis, trauma criticism and postcolonial studies, have also been employed in the analysis of the different novels. The convenience to use them was determined by the variety of topics tackled in each of them. This dissertation could thus be described as an interdisciplinary study, which aims to integrate different theories in order to dig up into Muslim women's activism, and to bring to the surface the distinct and disparate ways in which Muslim feminist writers Iqbalunnisa Hussain, Nawal El Saadawi, Leila Abuolela and *Alia Mamdouh* have used their fiction as a tool to propagate their ideas. They have undoubtedly transcended the label of 'feminists'; their works also wish to contribute to the improvement of society at large.

Due to the significance and impact of the socio-political contexts out of which these four novels emerged, at the beginning of each chapter, devoted to one novelist in particular, some information is given to help readers to better understand and trace back the social and political aspects in the authors' lives. This information briefly outlines the status of women, both in the authors' homelands and the diaspora, where these authors ultimately reside.

All of these authors underwent challenging experiences within their families and/or society at large. To begin with, they suffered sex discrimination and inferiority. Their resentment and dissatisfaction with many strict old-time traditions, together with the misuse of religion on the part of men to oppress women, stimulated their social activism, while their political activism mainly resulted from their opposition to neo-colonizing

powers in Muslim countries. Their socio-political contexts, and in turn their respective social and political positions, have played a decisive role in the way they write.

Each chapter has been devoted to investigating the divergent facets of one writer in particular, and the ways in which she put them to use in her novel. In other words, chapter two, three, four and five successively discuss the four novelists involved, their techniques, often intermingled with her own real-life experiences, and the peculiarity of their respective communities, with a view to disclosing how the novels tackled all of these issues. As has been shown, these four authors are quite different from one another, and approach women-related issues from their own unique perspectives.

The second chapter of this study has been devoted to Indian novelist and reformist Iqbalunnisa Hussain and her novel *Purdah and Polygamy: Life in an Indian Muslim Household*. Its publication marked the emergence and development of the so-called Indo-Anglian novel, and in particular the contribution of female Muslim novelists to the global articulation of women's concerns in this genre. In her novel, Hussain raised some of the most sensitive issues that afflicted Muslim women, all the more so in her rather conservative Muslim community. She exposed the most severe types of subjection and persecution that Muslim women were subjected to, especially as regards the imposition of a strict purdah system and polygamy.

Since purdah and polygamy, two of the most oppressive practices in Islam, are not common in other major religions, non-Muslim readers may experience some difficulty when trying to apprehend their mechanism and nature. To fill in this gap, some details regarding their origins and how they were legitimized on religious pretexts and/or biased interpretations of religious texts have been given. In addition to referring to the impact of modernity on traditional Muslim women, Hussain also shed light on the plight of the Muslim widows and the inferiority with which they were treated.

Hussain believes in the power of fiction to critically confront oppression and achieve the desired changes. Fiction, a powerful medium that can easily appeal to the masses, is able to describe reality and, even more important, denounce injustices and pave the way for a better social future. It feeds the imagination of readers and makes them aware

of the changes that women have managed to bring about within their communities. English fiction written by Muslim feminists in particular has played a significant role in changing the way Muslim women are looked at. No longer a passive victim, the contemporary Muslim woman is here depicted as an independent individual who possesses the power to assert herself.

Unlike Hussain's allusive approach to Muslim women's struggle, the outstanding Egyptian psychiatrist Nawal El Saadawi explicitly articulated her feminist views in her novel *Woman at Point Zero*, analyzed in chapter three. In this chapter, El Saadawi's socio-political background, her controversial lifestyle and the polemical reception of her writings have been explored, together with the most relevant themes and motifs shown in her novel. Among such topics were women's commodification, strict surveillance, limited freedom and education, and the insidious trauma from which many women suffered as a result of having been forced into arranged marriages and been reduced to the condition of slaves. El Saadawi approaches Muslim women's cause in a rebellious way that has confused patriarchal and religious authorities. As a result, her novel was received with derision on account of its rather controversial ideas, which were regarded by traditionalists as an unreserved manifestation of perversity. Although she severely criticized western feminism and accused it of oppressing other feminist movements, El Saadawi's feminist thoughts were also censured in the Muslim world for being rather secular and westernized. In *Woman at Point Zero*, she delineated her female protagonist as a revolutionary subject who rebelled against patriarchal traditions, systematically reinforced by the misuse of religion and strictly imposed on women in her society.

On the contrary, the Sudanese novelist Leila Abuolela, examined in chapter four, depicted her female protagonist in *Minaret* as a spiritually faithful woman whose adherence to religion empowered her. This chapter analyzes Leila Abuolela as an Islamist feminist who has tackled Muslim women's struggle in a rather moderate way. The novelist's life has been outlined at the beginning of the chapter, to then delve into the analysis of her novel *Minaret*. In this novel Abuolela struggled to defend and disseminate her Islamist ideology in a non-Muslim society, i.e. the West. She portrayed Muslims in a way that clearly refuted the old stereotypical image that showed them as incapable of coexisting

with a non-Muslim majority in a western society. Aboulela endeavoured to write a committed Muslim text that might offer in-depth knowledge about Islam and the thoughts and convictions of practicing Muslims.

In her attempt to clean the image of Islam, especially after the events of September 11, she depicted it as a religion of peaceful coexistence and a source of power for the women who believed in it. Additionally, she strived to provide her Muslim characters with a transnational Muslim identity that increases their power and perspectives. Besides, she introduced the polemical hijab as a badge that distinguishes them as free religious women, rather than as an icon of their oppression. Engaging with Muslim women in a secular western community is, for Abuolela, the best way to propagate her Islamist ideas in the modern world.

Chapter five has been dedicated to Iraqi novelist Alia Mamdouh and her novel *Naphtalene: A Novel of Baghdad*. Mamdouh's life and her contribution to the genre that has been recently known as Muslim women writing, or Islamic feminist literature, have been explored at the beginning of the chapter. Although she has daringly condemned patriarchal domination and overstepped many traditional red lines in her life, Mamdouh is, on the whole, fairly moderate when propounding her feminist views. Unlike El Saadawi, Mamdouh's subtle attack against religious hypocrisy, particularly in relation to women, has kept her and her novels away from the derisive literary reception that El Saadawi suffered. She has severely censured the Muslim writers who recurrently reiterate the western prejudiced views that depict Muslims negatively and equate them with terrorists or underdeveloped victims.

In *Naphtalene*, she made use of her own experience of exile to address the oppression that patriarchal and religious authorities impose on people, particularly women. She rebelled against the patriarchal monopolization of religion, while inviting women to fight for a Muslim feminine agency that can run parallel to that of men. A detailed analysis of Mamdouh's novel has disclosed the author's unique descriptive style, whereby she has managed to successfully convey reality as she, as a Muslim woman, saw it. She has depicted her main characters as being able to develop and have the chance and ability to

make a change in their living conditions, in spite of the fact that they may at times have to comply with the strictures imposed on them by the ruling authorities. As regards her descriptions of place, she tried her best to retrieve the image of the home that she lost but keeps on missing and remembering. With the help of her past memories and imagination, Mamdouh has managed to revisit and 're-member' her hometown, Baghdad, so important for her further development in life.

In their novels, all of these novelists put the blame for the stereotypical fragmented image of Islam and Muslims on both Muslims themselves and the West. Earlier Muslim novelists mainly focused on women's passivity and lack of power to make a change, in a word, their novels were mainly concerned with exposing women's miserable conditions, but without suggesting or contributing any solutions. The stereotypical image commonly attributed to Muslim women by many prominent Muslims, and all the more so non-Muslim writers, was that of a feeble figure, confined within the home and subject to the most oppressive conventional norms. They were represented like this for too long. To make up for this, though, a group of brave Muslim novelists like the ones who have been considered here strove to make a remarkable change as regards the way in which religious, social, political and other internal and external factors have contributed to distorting the Muslim female picture.

Those novelists saved no effort to eradicate the firmly implanted idea that Muslim women must be constantly obedient, patient and self-sacrificing. Instead, they portrayed them as voluntarily choosing to sacrifice everything for the welfare of their family and husbands, always with a view to seeking God's forgiveness and mercy. Although, as was argued before, these novelists have tackled the cause of Muslim women differently, they all believe that a Muslim woman is honored by Islam, which places her in a position equal to that of man. They also insist that Muslim women are not always oppressed, as the West constantly claims, providing they are treated in accordance with the real Islamic teachings. In a word, they all affirm that Islam, in its essence and as is explicitly mentioned in the Qur'an, emphasizes women's rights and ensures them a decent life.

In the same way as patriarchal authorities misread, or rather misused, the Qur'an, western feminists misapprehended Islamic feminists' most important argument, namely, that Islam is not responsible for women's inferiority in Muslim societies. Rather, it is the way Islam has been patriarchally interpreted and practiced that resulted in such inferiority and marginalization of Muslim women. Through their respective texts, originally written or translated into English, these Muslim novelists invite scholars from all over the world to pay more attention to texts written outside what Jessica Berman (2012) described as the "universal, western, white, straight, able" world (10). They also strive to defocus the "one-time dominant, universal standpoint" of the West (Berman, 2012, 10). Bringing together novelists belonging to different communities makes it possible to display a multiplicity of lived experiences, positionalities and understandings of gender and sexual identity as offered by different feminist perspectives. Moreover, examining the fiction of such Muslim female authors calls on researchers to reconsider the place of Muslim women in the global history of literature.

All the novelists analyzed are aware of the contrasts existing between the globally circulated texts about Muslim women's conditions and their actual lives in reality. They also insist that many Muslim texts turn a blind eye on the worst forms of discrimination against women in communities where Islamic religion is strongly contaminated and perverted by patriarchal interests. Such abominations include honour crimes, forced marriages, exploitation, physical and mental abuse, and deprivation of natural rights such as education and work, to mention but some. In an attempt to change this and prompt Muslim women to action, their novels do their best to guide them towards emancipation.

Through the works of some Muslim and many non-Muslim writers, Islam was widely viewed as patriarchal, misogynist and incompatible with the basic values of modern contemporary societies, such as human rights and democracy. To oppose this, these writers have done their best to do away with ignorance as regards the history of Islam and the diversity and flexibility of its jurisprudence, relying on authentic sources that exonerate Islam from all the crimes that patriarchy is committing in its name.

Since each of these novelists has had her own firsthand experience of a Muslim woman's life, they have approached Islam and its impact on women's lives in different ways. They could be divided into revolutionary and rather more moderate challengers to patriarchy and its manipulation of social and religious affairs. On the one hand, Nawal El Saadawi and Alia Mamdouh have overtly questioned the traditions imposed by patriarchal authorities and reinforced by the biased interpretation of religious texts. They have done so by introducing extremely rebellious female protagonists in their novels. Additionally, they have explicitly manifested their rejection and disobedience to patriarchal institutionalized norms, despite the cruel attacks they have received on account of their firm positions.

On the other hand, Iqbalunnisa Husain and Leila Abuolela's undermining of oppressive practices against women was mainly undertaken by stating or highlighting the reality of Muslim women's conditions in environments where old-time traditions strictly rule and religion is hypocritically practiced. They have been more concerned with the denunciation of these oppressive practices by presenting a panoramic image of women's lives rather than involving their female characters in an open confrontation with both patriarchal and religious authorities. Obviously, El Saadawi and Mamdouh have approached the same issues in a more radical way.

Hopefully, bringing together a variety of such works in this study may help readers to better know and appreciate Muslim fiction originally written or translated into English in a globally broader spectrum. Such diversity, or complexity as was described by Amal Amireh (1996), in turn "guards against stereotyping and pigeon-holing" (par. 20). Reading a variety of literary works will definitely expose both Muslim and non-Muslim readers to a broad array of styles and ideologies fostered by authors from diverse Muslim backgrounds.

What is undeniable is that Muslim female writers have set an example in bringing forth Muslim women's strife toward progress in both local and global scenarios. They have conquered their own position in the history of literature by fairly exposing the physical and mental status of many Muslim women. They gave voice to previously silenced women.

This is one of the main reasons why this kind of texts deserve further critical attention; these texts have undoubtedly helped to eliminate and/or contest the patriarchal ideologies that have contaminated Islam and its teachings.

Islamic feminism has thus become an area of great interest for all enlightened people around the globe. Muslim feminists like the ones discussed here have greatly contributed to this phenomenon. They have tried to offer an authentic, although by no means homogenous and idyllic, image of contemporary Muslim life and culture. These four Muslim novelists could thus be regarded as pioneers in this endeavour. They have conveyed their experiences in a genre, the novel, and a medium, the English language, that are, on the whole, taken to be alien to Muslim culture. With their novels, then, these writers have left their own mark on global women's literature.

So far no serious studies have been carried out in this field. The present dissertation can thus be deemed as one of the first to consider Muslim feminist novelists whose Islamic backgrounds are socially, politically, traditionally and geografically divergent. As has been argued before, its main aim has been to make up for this lack by bringing to light the distinct ways in which four Muslim feminist novelists articulate their thoughts and ideologies regarding Muslim women and their status. It has also shown the newfangled fashion in which the Muslim female character has been introduced in literature. This study has also drawn attention to the impact that such representation can have when it comes to rectifying old sterotypical images of the Muslim woman. In addition, it has revealed how these novelists have managed to disseminate their feminist ideologies in an international/ transnational context.

The current study draws its strength from these writers' talent and the clever way in which each of them has tackled fairly sensitive topics in their novels. As was explained by Spacks (2013), according to patriarchal views, women's attractiveness and power lies in their virtue, always associated with loyalty to their husbands and strict sexual chastity. In opposition to this, the novels written by the authors analyzed here state that women's success can only be achieved if they are able to control their own destinies. In other words, Muslim women's emancipation can only be the direct result of their acquiring economic,

social and political independence, and their sincere adherence to the 'real' Islam creed will additionally help them to achieve their ultimate goals.

Unfortunately, in conservative Muslim societies, questioning, refuting or demanding different interpretations of the religious texts is usually perceived as an invitation or attempt to undermine and desecrate Islam and the Muslim community in general. The way in which these novelists are spreading their feminist thoughts has therefore stirred stagnant waters within the most conservative Muslim world, but it is also true that it has been mainly thanks to them and their works that the non-Muslim world has become aware of Muslim women's struggle for freedom and emancipation.

Although the current study has covered the most salient issues in the novels under consideration, many other critical matters could be taken into consideration: the way daughters-in-law are treated by their mothers-in-law, Muslim homosexuality, prostitution, and the difficulty of unifying Muslim feminists' endeavours by taking the Qur'an as their common source of inspiration, among others. Furthermore, there is still much to be said about Muslim women's status in other Muslim contexts. Examining authors from other major Muslim communities (Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, Algeria, to mention but some) could certainly provide a more inclusive and comprehensive outlook of Muslim women and their struggle, and would contribute a rather more panoramic view of Islamic feminism.

Another important aspect might be the analysis of the novels' male characters. An in-depth analysis of them would certainly contribute a deeper insight into the Muslim males' major motives behind subjugating women. Psychoanalytical theory could also be further used to delve into the psychological problems resulting from all of these forms of oppression, whereas narratology could help to better understand the treatment of point of view and the way in which the narrative is articulated. Last but not least, the (post/neo)colonial dimension of these authors and works could also be discussed. It is clear that Muslim feminists are trying, among other things, to re-write the western discourses that have for so long marginalized them. Postcoloniality has been vital in shaping both these writers' literary production and Islam, often incorporated in their writings as a major component. As is well known, colonialism has left a huge negative impact on most Muslim

societies, as can be seen in the political positions upheld by some characters in these novels, their dissatisfaction with political activism, and doubts as to how to better rebel against the western invader. I would very much like to tackle these topics in the near future.

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