

Remapping London: Islam in Aboulela's Fiction

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Abstract

This paper discusses the representations of Islam in Leila Aboulela's fiction with reference to topography in her work. She has presented the mosque as the centre of London in *Minaret* (2005), made a dance studio the venue of Islamic zikr meeting in *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015), and shown Kassim praying at the end of a "dark alley" in "The Boy in the Kebab Shop", from the collection of short stories *Coloured Lights* (2001). She has not changed the map of London, but rather presented it from a different angle, and has modelled her fiction on this perspective. This article discusses this representation of London and its effect on the characters and the ways in which this topography helps them to dissolve their stereotypes.

Keywords: Islam, remapping London, Islamophobia, negotiations.

“I couldn't even imagine Ramadan in London, London in Ramadan.”

(*Minaret* 30).

In Leila Aboulela's fiction religion is a conscious decision made by the characters. It is not a way of life chosen for the characters by their parents, rather it is a choice made by their own selves. The element of choice becomes more pronounced as the character moves from a Muslim country to a secular country. Najwa, in *Minaret* (2005), and Natasha, in *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015), take the West as a symbol for modernity and Islam as a symbol for backwardness. For them Europe was better than Africa. They overcome the stereotypes that they had been following about the West and about Islam through an apprehension of Islam. In “The Boy in the Kebab Shop”, from the collection of short stories *Coloured Lights* (2001), Kassim gets inspired to accept Islam in his Judo classes, whereas he becomes a practicing Muslim through contact with Basheer who is the owner of the kebab shop where he works. In Aboulela's fiction land becomes a boundless space that cannot be labelled as religious or secular. Definitions break and land develops a mysterious identity that is hidden from its inhabitants. This article discusses the topography in Aboulela's fiction: her two novels *Minaret* and *The Kindness of Enemies* and her short story “The Boy in the Kebab Shop”. This essay studies the relationship between land and Islam in Aboulela's fiction. It discusses the role that land plays in the practice of Islam. How it helps the characters in following and understanding Islam and the effect that this relationship has on characters' ideologies and how it breaks stereotypes for the characters.

Minaret is a story of how Najwa rediscovers Islam in London after losing her

family and indulging in an illicit relationship with her university friend, Anwar. *The Kindness of Enemies* is narrated by Natasha who witnesses the arrest of Osama Raja as a suspect for terrorist activities ten years after the 9/11 attacks. Burglary in her own home and an accusation by her head of department for not reporting Osama as a terrorist suspect leave her feeling alienated in Scotland after living there for twenty years. “The Boy in the Kebab Shop”, from Aboulela’s collection of short stories *Coloured Lights*, is about the meeting of Kassim and Dina. Both intend to marry the other, but it is only after Dina sees Kassim praying that she realizes that to be with him she would have to become a practicing Muslim herself. The story ends with Dina trying to decide between a religious life with Kassim and a secular one with her mother.

Leila Aboulela’s fiction explicitly deals with Islam and its effect on Muslims, particularly on women, and her fiction has been widely discussed regarding Islam and identity. For Example, Eva Hunter, Renata Pepicelli, and Muhammad Abdullah discuss Aboulela’s novels from feminist perspectives and study the impact of Islam in the characters’ lives. In her discussion on *Minaret* in her chapter “Recent Literary Representation of British Muslims” Claire Chambers studies cognitive remapping of London. She studies the ways that Islam and its practices influence Najwa’s life. Chambers’ study of *Minaret* is close to the topic taken up by this article, as this research will analyse Islam through remapping of London in Aboulela’s fiction. Her study is focused on religion as an ideology and identity, and its differences from the British values rather than on remapping of Britain, whereas this article will centre on geography and its meaning in lives of characters. Carla Rodriguez Gonzalez talks about cartography

in Leila Aboulela's two novels, *Minaret* and *The Translator* and two short stories, "The Visitors" and "The Boy in the Kebab Shop". Her study concerns the presentation of Western cities, London and Aberdeen, and the Sudanese city, Khartoum, and how it questions the image of unproblematic urban associations, and marginalization faced by the characters.

While researching Aboulela's works it was found that most of the studies are done on the relation between religion and identity and Islam and feminism. Also, there is little research done on her most recent novel, *The Kindness of Enemies* which is also taken up by this article. Claire Cambers comes close to discussing mapping in the fiction, however, she has taken up cognitive remapping and does not discuss the actual topography in Aboulela's works. Carla Rodriguez Gonzalez has discussed the cities regarding their treatment of migrants. This article studies the role that land plays in the lives of the characters in their practice of their religion, and how it helps them to overcome stereotypes. By discussing topography this article studies that aspect of Aboulela's fiction that the writer herself chose as the first image of her novel *Minaret*, that is, an image of a mosque as the centre of London. It contributes greatly in the story lines as well as the themes of her works.

Aboulela's characters attach certain identities to their homelands and other countries and live with these paradigms until their independent experiences teach them otherwise. In *Minaret* London is primarily secular for Najwa and the people around her. Islam is synonymous with anti-modern and to be Western is to be modern. It is an ideal state of being. The West allows freedom to its citizens. A freedom that is unattainable

in a Muslim country, like Sudan. In London Najwa compares the absence of societal pressure on numerous occasions to how it would have been different in Sudan. When Omar decides to go to a disco after their father's arrest, when she sits alone in a restaurant after Uncle Saleh's visit, and when she is publicly holding hands with Anwar, she notes how in London she is free from the cultural restrictions that would've resulted in slander in Sudan. Then this freedom turns to sexual freedom and becomes a tool for exploitation, as Anwar makes Najwa aware of her freedom to have sex with him, calling it the broadminded thing to do, and uses this relationship to get Najwa's money to do his PhD. Being in a relationship with Anwar defines being "Western" as allowing yourself to have sex outside of marriage – which is not allowed in Islam. Najwa finds temporary solace from guilt by thinking that she was closer to being a Londoner because she was having sex with Anwar:

He talked about the West, about the magazines I read – *Cosmo* and *Marie Claire*. 'Tell me,' he said, 'how many twenty-five-year-old girls in London are virgins?' That was when I laughed and felt a little better. [...] He was right, I was in the majority now, I was a true Londoner now. [...] 'I know you're Westernized, I know you're modern,' he said, 'that's what I like about you – your independence' (*Minaret* 176).

Here West equals independence which becomes restraint for Najwa because of her need to show Anwar that she is not bound to Sudanese customs and can question them and analyse them. When Anwar calls Najwa independent he comments on her ability to think differently about sexuality from what she was taught in Sudan. He had said earlier:

“Like every other Arab girl [...] you’ve been brainwashed about the importance of virginity. [...] Arab society is hypocritical [...] with different standards for men and women” (*Minaret* 175). Anwar sees Najwa as a sex object, he uses her to fulfil his sexual needs without an offer of marriage or even emotional support or physical security, and his complements are mostly aimed at making her comfortable about their sexual relationship. This use of the word "independent" does not mean that Anwar believes her to be able to think for herself or act for herself, it denotes his approval of Najwa for her acceptance of their sexual relationship. Thus, Najwa is repeatedly made aware of her similarity to Londoners, of the need to forego the hypocrisy of Sudan, and the freedom that was to be availed from the West.

However, she lost her freedom unknowingly due to the grandness of the notion of freedom itself. Anwar often exploited this idea to gain power over Najwa. When the guilt became unbearable for her she finally decided to adopt Islam. While justifying her decision of visiting the mosque she says: “In the mosque I feel like I’m in Khartoum again. It’s the atmosphere,” (*Minaret* 244). When Najwa starts practicing it in London Islam is still something separate from London. She still hasn’t started associating London with Islam. It is through Ali that Najwa begins to associate the two. She is amazed at the fact that someone so British could follow Islam. When she compares him to Anwar she begins to take Islam as an individual choice rather than as that of a society. “I had got the impression from Anwar that the English were all secular and liberal. Ali was nothing like that, yet he was completely English and had never set foot outside Britain” (*Minaret* 241). Her impression of the West was shaped by the stereotypes that she was

fed by Anwar. His own impression of England is such because of the connection he has drawn between secularism and progress: “[Anwar] believed it was backward to have faith in anything supernatural” (*Minaret* 241). Her encounter with Ali makes her see above territorial labels that she had given to Islam. Instead of relating Islam primarily with Khartoum, she begins to consider it as a part of London as well. The mosque does not only connect her to Khartoum anymore, it connects her to people from different parts of the world, Indian, Senegalese, and those born and raised in London.

Detaching herself from Anwar she redefines freedom for herself. This freedom is not the chaotic idea that had been idealized by her family and friends in Khartoum, that resulted in problems like Omar’s drug dealing. Eva Hunter notes that Najwa gives up the freedom that is “typical of this Modern time” (Hunter 94). She later criticizes Aboulela for making Najwa chose to surrender, as “Islam means to surrender” (Hunter 94). However, it does not hold the same meaning for Najwa as:

The notion of liberty in Western thought, since the time of Hobbe’s *Leviathan*, has meant a freedom from external constraints and the right of individual self-determination. [...] [I]n Sufi tradition, freedom has been compared to ‘perfect slavery’, which indicates [...] that the institution was often used as a metaphor for understanding ‘the relationship between Allah the “master” and his human “slaves”’. Aboulela provocatively challenges Western perceptions of what freedom entails. (Chambers 185)

Najwa goes back to the kind of freedom where she had some guide to direct her in her

decision making. After losing her parents, she turns to Allah. She indeed surrenders to Him and tries to become a “perfect slave” whose Master is pleased with her. With this she chooses to determine her conditions of choice of subjection. Thus, for her, “true freedom is not the freedom of choice. True freedom is freedom to [...] change the conditions of choice” (Zizek 00:17:05-00:17:12).

When Najwa's definition of freedom changes, she becomes free of the stereotypes that associated Islam with oppression and placed it far from the European ideal of freedom. The city that she had repeatedly associated with freedom and modernity finally lives up to its character, however, that was only possible when Najwa took control of the meaning of freedom itself. Thus, Islam becomes the centre of Najwa's freedom, and with it the mosque becomes the centre of London. Hence, against the stereotypes about London as a secular city that Najwa grew up with, London becomes a city with a mosque as its centre. Islam becomes the centre of the most modern city. It becomes the centre of modernity and the centre of her actual freedom.

Similarly, Aboulela has given a dual identity to two places – the kebab shop, and the judo club—in her short story “The Boy in the Kebab Shop”. Kassim had faced incidents as a child that made him feel different from his peers. In the judo club Kassim met other kids who made him aware of his religious difference from his cousins and school friends. His Judo classes were held “in the city, away from his suburban home” (CL 58). Aboulela gives this as the reason for his independence in these classes from his secular mother and cousins. Without them he was free to explore the side of his identity that he had inherited from his father, and that which made him different from his mother

and his cousins. Although his father had taken him to the children's mosque school "a total of five times", he has had a secular upbringing. Then it is the kebab shop where he works. Aboulela gives this place greater role in Kassim's religious life than the mosque. Despite Kassim's regular attendance in the Reverts class, Kassim is indebted to Basheer, the kebab shop's owner, for helping him become a practicing Muslim.

Foucault notes that "we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another" (Foucault 3). However, Aboulela creates heterotopias "which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault 3). The Judo lesson is an open class for anyone who wishes to learn the art. For Kassim it becomes a class where he learns about his faith that he had been born into but had always lived apart from. The kebab shop is a place that invites people to fulfil their physical needs, for Kassim it also caters his spiritual growth along with providing him with the necessary physical requirements. It serves as a mosque for Dina and Kassim that calls them to Islam. For Kassim the shop is important because it encourages him to practice his faith. For Dina, it is because this is where she confronts the choice between a secular life and a religious one. Her walk through the staff-only door and through the small dark alley is described in detail. Dina enjoys this walk and sees things that ordinary customers do not see when they visit the shop. It is dark and thus Dina's walk is slow and cautious. She takes note of everything that she sees, enjoying the intimacy. However, when she sees Kassim praying she is shocked. She sees a side of Kassim that

she had known but never really acknowledged. This encounter makes her face the depth of Kassim's personality.

With this secret passage in the kebab shop and the judo lessons, Aboulela contests the homogeneity of a place. She gives them a depth that is visible to only a few though not unattainable: Kassim's mother and cousins did not have a convenient access to the Judo lessons, and the small room in the kebab shop is behind a restricted "For Staff Only" door. It presents Islam as a lifestyle that can easily mix with culture. It does not have to be removed, isolated, and pronounced like a mosque. It can exist as a heterotopia where identities overlap and give profundity to one another.

Land in *the Kindness of Enemies* is a source of identity, freedom, culture and religion. People's relation to land is highlighted in the jihad led by Imam Shamil against the Russians, and by Natasha's alienation in Scotland after spending twenty years trying to fit in the land. However, Aboulela simultaneously draws attention to the core of identity of people that is independent of land. Thus, the novel is a commentary on the importance of land in formation of one's identity, and a lesson on the need to think above one's associations to places and their influences on their lives.

Natasha is ambiguous about her identity and wishes to merge with the West that is different from the Sudan that she left behind to be with her mother and Tony—the man who lived in the house with English alphabets along the railings that spoke of prosperity. After trying for twenty years to make people overlook her skin colour and her Muslim name, she realises the fallacy of her efforts when she faces the criticism from her boss after Osama Raja's arrest. She is still trying to overcome her anxiety when

she meets Malak in London who convinces her to go to a zikr meeting. It was held in a North London dance studio. “Floor-to-ceiling mirrors, cushions on the sprung hardwood floor, a barre all the way round” (*KoE* 216). It is a setting that is completely different from that of the mosques that is connected to the Muslims. In Natasha’s thesis Muslims had a glorious past, but her perception of their present was the opposite. Natasha related Islam to Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussain and wanted to distance herself from it.

When Islam is mistaken as a culture then it starts to incorporate symbols and metaphors that solidify a paradigm in minds of a community. Such symbols include beards, hijabs, and mosques. As Aboulela describes this scene through Natasha’s eyes: “I looked out of the window and saw the girl in the hijab who had come with Oz to my talk on Monday. [...] Behind her two bearded men walked in the same direction. This was a higher than usual rate of Muslim sighting for our small town. It was Friday of course and they were heading to the mosque” (*KoE* 139). So, beards denote Muslims, Muslims pray, and mosque is the place for the Muslims’ prayers. This shows how characters in the novel attribute certain qualities to land. It was a natural deduction and only highlights the involuntary reflexes of people to associate certain people with certain places. Being a Muslim in Britain also means being of a heritage that is ignorant of the development that was going on around them. Natasha narrates:

Many of the young Muslims I taught throughout the years couldn’t wait to bury their dark, badly dressed immigrant parents who never understood what was happening around them or even took an interest, who walked down high streets as if they were still in a village, who obsessed about

halal meat and arranged marriages and were so impractical, so arrogant as to imagine that their children would stay loyal. (*KoE* 6)

Thus, the cycle of a Muslim's identity includes backwardness, resistance to development, beards, hijab, and mosque. In a city where such stereotypes prosper, Aboulela decides to hold a zikr meeting in a dance studio.

The zikr meeting in the dance studio breaks away from these identifications. It denotes the necessity for a person to look beyond the surface and to consider the core. It expands the stereotypical radius of Islam's reach to development. Natasha had consciously separated herself from religion and had refused to think of it as an option for her because she considered it as a risk to her professional development and her desire to be taken as a British national. For her Islam was related to the past and the glory of Islam and its heroes was historical, not modern. The dance studio and the professional people attending and leading the zikr creates a different picture of Islam than Natasha's beliefs. Here, Aboulela shows how Islam adapts to the different requirements of people. There is no hesitation in Malak or any of the members of the meeting in holding the gathering in the dance studio because the essence of the meeting does not change. Islam becomes the centre of the mosque, rather than the mosque the centre of Islam. Aboulela shows the vanity of relating Islam to a particular form of architecture. As J.P. Gulraj quotes Dalpat: "If the Lord lives in the pipal tree, who lives in the babul then?" (104). She wants the readers to free themselves of the superficial rituals that people have made a part of the Islamic beliefs. As Rohal asks: "Now tell me, he that sleeps inside the Kaba shrine, on which side should he stretch his legs?" (Gulraj 103-104).

This essay shows that Leila Aboulela has used topography as a symbol to represent Islam's association to people and its role in their lives. According to Aboulela, land itself is neither religious nor secular, but the individuals living on it that can use it for their preferred purposes; Najwa used the isolation in London to start a religious life, Kassim used the kebab shop to be in Basheer's company who could help him strengthen his faith. In *Minaret* remapping of London shows that Najwa is disillusioned about the stereotypes that she was fed by her family and friends about Islam and about London, while in *The Kindness of Enemies* it proves as the first step towards Natasha's re-education about Islam and the West. Both learn the fallacy of appearances, and the need to understand religion, land, and modernity. This study of the three texts shows that Islam is only one dimension in the personality of an individual rather than the only quality that can define a Muslim. By having the characters practice Islam in the West Aboulela shows that Islam is not a monolith that resists change or is inadaptable to educational or industrial progress, but rather it is a lifestyle that can be incorporated in other cultures and can be followed with all professional careers. So, mainly through topography Aboulela invites readers to have an open view about Islam and its teachings, and about different countries, and not go by stereotypical labels that rob from them their actual values that add richness to them.

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