New Horizons in English Studies 10/2025

MIGRAMEDIA

Emine Sayer

Erciyes Universit, Türkiye
emineduzcekic@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0005-1115-4800

Betül Ateşci Koçak

Erciyes Universit, Türkiye
batescikocak@erciyes.edu.tr
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7937-953X

Identity Construction through Transnational Feminism in *Minaret* by Leila Aboulela*

Abstract. The construction of identity, an ongoing and complex process, is shaped by both internal and external factors that contribute to a sense of individuality and personal formation. However, this process might become complex when viewed globally, as factors such as globalization, colonial legacies, migration patterns, and economic structures significantly shape identity formation. A critical perspective known as transnational feminism acknowledges that global forces such as capitalism, colonialism, and migration, as well as individual and cultural factors, shape identities. In this context, identity construction emerges as a critical field of inquiry, illuminating how the interplay of power dynamics, historical legacies, and regional experiences shapes women's identities. In doing so, it rejects Western feminism's tendency to universalize by highlighting the interconnectedness of gendered experiences across national and cultural boundaries. This study aims to analyze the construction of identity, shaped by both individual and cultural frameworks, through the perspective of transnational feminism in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*. It will also include a textual analysis of key excerpts from *Minaret* to explore Naj-

* This article is part of the EU co-funded project MigraMedia: Migration Narratives in European Media: Teaching, Learning, and Reflecting (Reference: 2023-1-DE01-KA220-HED- 000154375), see https://www.uni-hildesheim.de/migramedia/. It is derived from Emine Sayer's MA thesis titled 'Identity Construction through Transnational Feminism in Minaret, Martita, I Remember You and Assembly' conducted under the supervision of Assist. Prof. Betül Ateşci Koçak

DOI: 10.17951/nh.2025.10.327-339

wa, the protagonist, and her internal struggles, especially her moments of challenging Western norms and strengthening her identity through her faith and cultural background. By analyzing Najwa's personal journeys alongside those of other female characters, this study aims to demonstrate that, despite differences in experience, background, and geography, there is common ground for crossing borders and creating a transnational feminism that challenges fixed identity constructs and promotes solidarities rooted in shared differences and local struggles.

Keywords: Transnational feminism, identity, displacement, everyday experiences

Introduction

Identity is a complex phenomenon that individuals perceive differently, shaped by both personal and social factors. As Anthony Elliot (2020, 3) states, "The study of identity is, among other things, an inquiry into the ways in which people may come to emotionally invest in their own self-making, self-construction and self-renewal". In this context, feminism has provided a crucial perspective by highlighting how gender serves as a fundamental organizing principle of identity, shaping experiences of power, representation, and belonging. However, feminism has historically been divided along ideological lines, resulting in varying interpretations of identity and its development. From the nineteenth century onward, early feminist theory was influenced by an essentialist and binary view of gender, which primarily linked women's identity to their relationship with men and aimed to achieve equality within existing patriarchal structures. Within this framework, liberal feminism defines identity in terms of equality and autonomy, grounding it in the rational individual and the principle of legal equal rights. However, it aims for inclusion within patriarchal systems rather than transforming them. Subsequently, feminist movements challenged this perspective by emphasizing that gender identity is not limited to a binary understanding and that diverse sexualities and power dynamics are also important social issues (Chenoy 2010, 2). Radical feminism shifts focus to collective resistance and women's political agency. In contrast, Marxist feminism focuses on material and class relations, arguing that women's role in capitalist production influences their social identity. Therefore, identity arises as a relational and structural construct, shaped by gendered and economic hierarchies in which economic power determines social dominance (Branaman 2020, 107). At this point in feminist discourse, the emphasis on identity centered on perceived neutral distinctions between men and women; however, the diversity among women was predominantly neglected until multicultural, global, and postcolonial feminist studies highlighted the variations within womanhood. Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake (1997, 157) refer to a minority of second-wave feminists who argue against the institutionalized norms about identity by stating "They were deconstructing the labels 'feminist' and 'woman,' questioning the way in which such labels functioned within binary hierarchies and the way in which particular subject positions were excluded by such labels in order to reify the boundaries of each category."

In a similar analytical frame, Rosemarie Tong (2009, 7) points out that the intersections of class, gender, and race demonstrate how inequality operates not only through structural hierarchies but also through the layered identities that shape women's daily lives. As feminist understandings of identity became more intersectional and attentive to cultural and geopolitical contexts, the notion that women are different and have different priorities is a tenet of global and postcolonial feminism, marking a shift toward postcolonial and transnational perspectives (228). This shift exposes the limitations of Western feminist frameworks, in which women's history is characterized by invisible oppression and subordination. Reflecting this homogenizing tendency, Robin Morgan (1996, 91) underscores that "…the patriarchy's vast and varied set of rules that define not only a woman's physical appearance but her physical reality itself". Nevertheless, this early internationalist perspective largely reproduced Western interpretive frameworks built upon the experiences of middle-class white women (Hekman 2000, 290). Cheryl McEwan (2001, 99) further critiques Western feminism's universalist assumption that gender oppression is identical worldwide, constructing a stereotype of Third World women and privileging Eurocentric norms through processes of othering. Postcolonial feminism emerges as a framework that challenges Eurocentric homogenization, foregrounds diverse experiences shaped by ethnicity, colonialism, and geopolitics, and situates women's identities within localized and historically contingent contexts. Forming the core of postcolonial feminist critique, Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) reveal how "Third World women" are often represented as a homogeneous group defined by victimhood and passivity, a process they describe as worlding or segregation. Their analyses have become foundational to postcolonial feminist theory, advancing a more inclusive, intersectional feminist discourse that challenges global power dynamics and centers marginalized voices (Enns, Davis, and Díaz 2020, 10).

Emerging from postcolonial critique, transnational feminism expands the analysis of identity beyond colonial legacies to encompass global interconnections, migration, and diaspora with localized experiences. Janet M. Conway (2019, 43) notes that transnational feminism emerged as a way to redefine individuals, experiences, and ideas "across the borders of nation-states in an era of globalization". In this regard, transnational feminism acknowledges the fluid and multi-layered nature of identities, particularly for those who cross cultural borders, engage in diaspora, and migrate, which involves "voluntary or involuntary transborder movement and settlement" (Bhandari 2021, 104). Furthermore, transnational feminism highlights how women's stories and identities are represented across borders, a concept that Stuart Hall (1990, 222) describes as practices of representation shaped by specific "positions of enunciation" that are always contextual and situated. Additionally, Hall (1990, 225) emphasizes that representation actively constructs identity, as "identities" reflect how individuals are positioned by and position themselves within the narratives of the past.

Within this context, in the twenty-first century, transnational feminism has faced "new challenges" within its broader sociopolitical framework (Tamble and Thayer

2021, 24). Globalization, migration, and social segregation politics have reshaped the circumstances under which gender, race, and power intersect internationally since the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks. Arun Kundnani (2007, 180) explains the period after the attacks as "The result is a climate of hatred and fear, directed especially at Muslim and migrant communities, and the erosion of the human rights of those whose cultures and values are perceived as 'alien'." In a similar vein, Corienne L. Mason (2020, 71) notes that "Muslim women, especially those who wear the hijab, burqa, and niqab, are used as symbols for the cultural backwardness, social conservatism, and extremism of Islamic fundamentalism of the 'East." This relationship is consistent with Stuart Hall's (1990, 222) "… identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation". The relationship between agency and representation is particularly evident in literary works that portray post-9/11 Muslim women navigating faith, displacement, and belonging in transnational contexts. Seen in these contexts, transnational feminism addresses this tension, contesting homogenizing narratives and reclaiming the agency of Muslim women to express their identities beyond dichotomies of victimhood and liberation. In the wake of contemporary events and the diasporic context discussed above, feminist narrative writing underwent a profound transition, increasingly engaging with issues of religion, race, and geopolitics. Women writers, particularly those from Muslim and diasporic backgrounds, initiated an exploration of how global power dynamics, Islamophobia, and cultural dislocation influence female subjectivity and a sense of belonging. As Chapparban (2024, 157) notes, Muslim diasporic writers have sought to represent "the experiences of the Muslim *ummah* in the West resist the neo-Orientalist projections and misunderstandings about Islam and Muslims in their novels after 9/11". Particularly in contemporary British literature, which showcases the diversity of British society through a range of experiences and cultures, books written by women from the Global South are essential for examining identity formation across geopolitical and cultural barriers.

Female authors of Muslim heritage who write in English, regardless of their geographic locations, such as Taslima Nasreen, Fadia Faqir, Kamila Shamsie, and Leila Aboulela, contribute to this expanding body of work that reimagines belonging, subjectivity, and female agency in transnational contexts. Among such crucial authors, Leila Aboulela, a Sudanese novelist and economist, contributes to Anglophone Arabic literature by depicting the experiences of Muslim immigrants and presenting an alternative epistemology rooted in Islam (Hassan 2008, 298). Aboulela interweaves English, Arabic, and Islamic perspectives, challenging stereotypes about Muslim female identity and offering multidimensional representations that underscore the roles of spirituality, cultural heterogeneity, and the multifaceted nature of diaspora (Zulfiqar 2024, 580). *Minaret,* published in 2005, is Leila Aboulela's second novel. It examines how Najwa, the Sudanese Muslim protagonist navigating life between Khartoum and London, is shaped by migration challenges, cultural dislocation, and global power dynamics. The novel also uses Najwa's experiences to depict the challenges and opportunities that arise from regaining agency and voice within the intersecting spheres of cultural and religious con-

texts. The analysis of experience, agency, and spiritual self-construction is stated by Laila Aboulela as "When I was writing *Minaret*, I was thinking it would be a Muslim feminist novel… In *Minaret*, on the other hand, I wanted it to be that at the end she is relying on her faith rather than a career" (Chambers 2009, 99). This paper examines Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* through a transnational feminist framework centered on Mohanty (2003) to explore how Aboulela's work enriches the discourse on global feminism and how personal narratives can challenge dominant power structures. In particular, it examines how Najwa's search for personal identity within societal constraints mirrors the broader challenges faced by women in postcolonial contexts. This research also aims to clarify how decolonial and transnational feminism can be applied to contemporary literary works, emphasizing the importance of context in defining feminist theory and practice.

Reframing Najwa's Identity: A Transnational Feminist Reading of *Minaret*

In *Minaret*, Leila Aboulela uses a non-linear narrative structure that juxtaposes Najwa's experiences as a racialized immigrant in both Sudan and London. The division into six sections spanning two decades, from 1984 to 2004, marks key phases in the complex development of her identity. Najwa's persistent memories of Sudan and her fragmented flashbacks in London constitute acts of remembrance that reconstruct her individual and social history. Through these temporal returns, her diasporic identity emerges not as fixed, but as a fluid negotiation shaped by memory and displacement, a point clarified by Mohanty's argument that there is no constant return to the past to move the present; instead, there is always a questioning of how experience, memory, and knowledge serve as anchors in the creation of identity and subjectivity (Mohanty 2003, 78–90). The temporal and spatial transition from Najwa's affluent life in Khartoum to her exile in London establishes a narrative framework through which her identity is negotiated across intersecting dimensions of displacement, memory, and gendered cultural conflict. The sections depicting her exile are structured through flashbacks that juxtapose her memories of Khartoum with her present experiences in London. These temporal shifts reveal her subjectivity as an ongoing negotiation between past and present, origin and dislocation. Such narrative fluidity invites a multidimensional reading of Najwa's identity formation as a complex process shaped by the interplay of memory, migration, and social context.

Throughout the novel, Najwa feels that her daily routine, with its moments and pauses, takes her back to the past and then to the present. As Najwa reflects, "Sometimes a shift reminds me of it. Routine is ruffled, and a new start makes me suddenly conscious of what I have become, standing in a street covered with autumn leaves." (Aboulela 2005, 1). Such a temporal shift reveals how Najwa's shifting sense of time serves as a narrative device that disrupts the chronological order, allowing the novel to focus on her developing sense of self, shaped by memory, displacement, and the

ongoing conflict between her past and present identities. This fluidity of time aligns with Mohanty's (2003) critique of "hegemonic" Western feminism and its discursive portrayal of "Third World women" as a unified, monolithic, and sociologically powerless group. She highlights the importance of dismantling this idea by pointing to identities that are not fixed or essentialist but instead sites of negotiation that challenge ethnocentric and universalizing frameworks often imposed by Western feminist discourse (Mohanty 2003, 17–19). In this sense, Najwa's evolving subjectivity, which is shaped by memory, displacement, and reflection, exemplifies a transnational feminist perspective on identity as fluid, relational, and historically unstable, aligning with Hall's (1990, 222) notion of identity as a "production," perpetually in flux and formed through difference. This perspective is reflected in Najwa's relationships with other female characters in the novel, including her unnamed mother, her friend Randa, her employer Lamya, and the women in the diaspora around her. Najwa often feels alienated and shifts between the past and the present because of her experiences with those around her. She claims that there is no point in pushing herself; instead, she floats in her own way and manner, experiencing life's pulsing, forward motion when she sees herself in the diaspora (Aboulela 2005, 179). Her sense of alienation prompts her to reflect on the past and compare it to her life in diaspora. As she becomes more aware of how regional and global power structures shape her existence, she begins to redefine her identity. This awareness reflects what Hall (1990, 225) states about identity as "It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history, and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation."

In conjunction with this awareness of identity as a process of positioning, Najwa's relationships with others, particularly her mother, further illuminate the intersection of personal and historical forces in shaping women's subjectivity. Najwa gradually comes to recognize how different she is from her mother. Her mother is strong and resilient, but Najwa is more introspective. These differences come from different historical, cultural, and social contexts (Aboulela 2005, 38). From a transnational feminist perspective, this mother–daughter relationship exemplifies what Mohanty (2003, 55) asserts that "I want to suggest that it is possible to retain the idea of multiple, fluid structures of domination that intersect to locate women differently at particular historical conjunctures, while insisting on the dynamic oppositional agency of individuals and collectives and their engagement in 'daily life'."

Najwa's understanding of her mother's experiences demonstrates the intersection of gender, class, and colonial history in generating varied forms of agency, enabling both women to navigate and resist systemic hierarchies in unique yet interconnected manners.

Another point about Najwa is that she acknowledges the differences between her lifestyle and the community's. She has the financial means to enjoy her life with her social circle, especially with Randa, who also adopted English habits after her family returned from England, drinking in American clubs and dancing to Western pop music (Aboulela 2005, 23). Najwa begins to grapple with the conflict between her Western-

ized lifestyle and her Islamic surroundings. This tension intensifies when she flicks through an old magazine and comes across photos of Iranian women during the Iran–Iraq War, armed and fully veiled. Randa immediately rejects the image as a throwback to the Middle Ages. However, Najwa remains silent, unable to defend her point of view, and begins to question her own religious beliefs (Aboulela 2005, 29–30). Randa's immediate dismissal of the portrayal of veiled Iranian women as "medieval" illustrates what Mohanty (2003, 42) critiques:

> Universal images of the Third World woman (the veiled woman, chaste virgin, etc.), images constructed from adding the ''Third World difference'' to ''sexual difference,'' are predicated upon (and hence obviously bring into sharper focus) assumptions about Western women as secular, liberated, and having control over their own lives.

In contrast, Najwa's silence does not signify submission; rather, it exposes her discomfort with these hegemonic binaries. Her hesitation highlights a transnational feminist negotiation of identity, as she opposes both Western secular superiority and the homogenizing narratives that obscure the complexities of Muslim women's lived experiences.

While Najwa begins to question her religious beliefs, Randa's immediate rejection further reflects the internalization of Western cultural norms, which she has inherited through her family's history in England. Najwa's introspective doubt, juxtaposed with Randa's firm secular confidence, thus underscores the contrasting sociocultural positions within Sudanese society. It reveals how colonial modernity continues to shape women's perceptions of agency and liberation. This contrast also exemplifies Spivak's (1988) concept of the internalization of the dominant colonial discourse, wherein postcolonial elites unconsciously perpetuate hegemonic structures, thereby marginalizing the voices of subaltern groups. Through this internalization, the elite adopt the worldview and values of the colonizer, often mistaking them as universal truths, which results in the erasure or silencing of local, indigenous, and predominantly female subaltern perspectives. Such a focus on individualized identity formation stands in contrast to the religious frameworks that have predominated in earlier scholarship. Within this context, Najwa knows the situation, the servants of her house, and the privileges they have because her mother's family is aristocratic and benefits from British support, but she cannot assert herself, as she acknowledges her roots and remains embedded in a mode of subjectivity shaped by class-based privilege and the internalized legacies of colonial modernity, a condition Najwa herself articulates when she says, "My father is me. My family is me." (Aboulela 2005, 36–45). This dimension aligns with Mohanty's (2003, 59) assertion that colonial administrations reconfigured property, inheritance, and family laws to reinforce patriarchal hierarchies and generate novel forms of gendered inequality. Najwa's inability to assert herself, despite her awareness of privilege, reflects the enduring effects of colonial power dynamics that established men as agents and women as dependents within postcolonial class structures.

This theoretical dynamic takes concrete form when Najwa becomes aware that, despite her success and upper-class status, her freedom is constrained by her aristocratic family background and societal expectations, highlighting the importance of local context in shaping identity. She is also aware of social expectations and knows what kind of marriage she could have, as Anwar is not a suitable husband due to class differences (Aboulela 2005, 35). This passage exemplifies how Najwa's identity is shaped by complex social, political, and class-specific dynamics, consistent with Hall's conception of identity as fluid and context-dependent. This tension aligns with Spivak's observation that "Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernization."

Moreover, Najwas's internalization of class and gender expectations supports Mohanty's (2003) argument that both inherited conditions and contextual negotiations shape identity. Within this theoretical framework, Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* interrogates dominant Western feminist narratives that often simplify or generalize the lived experiences of women from diverse non-Western contexts. Najwa, as a main character, is influenced by converging factors: socio-economic privilege, gendered expectations, and a politically neutral upbringing. Although Najwa and her brother benefit from their father's political influence, societal gender norms constrain Najwa into a position of restraint: "... you are the girl; you are the quiet, sensible one. ..." Year in, year out, I have covered for Omar. I sensed his weakness and looked after Omar." (Aboulela 2005, 13). Her acceptance of these expectations exemplifies Mohanty's (2003) claim that subjectivity is influenced by discourse and disciplinary power.

In *Minaret*, patriarchal and sociopolitical discourses enforcing silence and conformity form and limit Najwa's subjectivity, thereby restricting her agency. This articulates how epistemic violence perpetuates current power relations by hindering the self-representation and resistance of subaltern women. Similarly, Hall (1990, 236) asserts that diasporic identities are not static but are constructed through language that is "performative moves in semantic, syntactic and lexical codes" and power dynamics. When Anwar, a politically active communist student, asked Najwa whether or not she had political ideas, she replied, "I do not know; I do not have any." Thus, that is a manifestation of structural silence rather than individual indifference (Aboulela 2005, 15). Her withdrawal from political engagement exemplifies how language defines the boundaries for women like her concerning visibility and involvement. These tensions in Najwa's behavior are not just personal but also reflect deeper structural mechanisms of identity construction. This idea becomes even clearer in Najwa's conversation with Anwar when he persistently questions her privilege: "How many servants do you have in your house?" and he implicitly criticizes Najwa's detachment from her country's socio-economic realities, questioning her indifference to the stark class disparities that still exist within Sudan (Aboulela 2005, 33). Such exchanges reveal how Najwa's political consciousness remains underdeveloped, shaped more by inherited class comfort than by active engagement with the inequalities surrounding her.

The first section concludes with a coup d'état, resulting in Najwa's father's loss of power and the family's descent into chaos (Aboulela 2005, 53). Najwa and her family move to London, initially unaware that this displacement and crossing borders would significantly reshape their identities. As Najwa notes, "We didn't know that we were being exiled; we didn't know we were seeking asylum. There was the comfort of our holiday flat, and my mother was generous with pocket money." (Aboulela 2005, 239). The resulting displacement signifies a shift from a national to a transnational identity, aligning with Mohanty's (2003, 44) idea that postcolonial migrations create new, multiethnic and multiracial groups, where formerly colonized subjects hold similar socioeconomic positions within global power systems. Subsequently, Najwa and her brother enjoy their first week in London; they go shopping and do not realize they are losing their upper-class Sudanese identity until they learn their father has been found guilty and executed (Aboulela 2005, 54–59). Her early lack of awareness corresponds to the idea that transnational displacement transforms identity through shifts in classed, gendered, and national hierarchies that operate across global power systems (Mohanty 2003, 191).

Therefore, identity is not fixed but shaped through intersecting structures of global power, including colonial legacies, nationalism, and class hierarchies. For this reason, when Najwa loses her economic and social privilege—not through deportation, but through her father's execution, her mother's psychological and physical illnesses, and her brother Omar's arrest for drug use—she acknowledges how family members become emotionally distant from one another, as they had never witnessed each other's downfall before and thus struggle to relate to the new realities they face (Aboulela 2005, 61).

While the first part can be seen as a resistance to the Western perception of the homogenous, oppressed, and generalized experiences of the Third World woman with unique experiences of women in a local sense, the parts in London can be an attribution to transnational feminism in the name of Najwa's self-realization and female voice with spiritual empowerment alongside 'shared differences' that bring individual female experiences in the diaspora into a common sphere. Najwa starts working as a maid in a Sudanese family and emphasizes that this is not her first job. She has learned how to be a maid from her previous maids, and instead of separating herself from them, she finds herself in them (Aboulela 2005, 65). According to Mohanty (2003), this is a process of self-construction and a form of resistance against the Western discourse that restricts women's professional opportunities, as Najwa actively chooses to do what societal conditions do not demand.

Another point to analyze is the fact that the women in the family Najwa works for are highly educated—one is a doctor and the other, Lamya, is pursuing a PhD—and that their views on life and religion differ from Najwa's, which, according to Mohanty (2003, 86), serves as an example of the diversity of women's experiences. Additionally, Najwa and Lamya both own silk scarves but wear them differently—Najwa as a hijab and Lamya as a headscarf—highlighting their shared yet distinct identities (Aboulela 2005, 97). This subtle detail reflects what Mohanty (2003, 225) describes as "shared differences". It

shows how women can share certain cultural or material symbols while expressing them in ways that reflect their individual experiences and choices. Mohanty (2003, 224) suggests rejecting generalization entirely and instead valuing the uniqueness of differences, emphasizing "…the specificity of difference is based on a vision of equality attentive to power differences within and among the various communities of women." Consequently, Aboulela, along with Najwa and other female characters, exemplifies a range of experiences and individual female voices. In the second section, Najwa faces her spiritual self and navigates the difficulties of immigration alongside women like Lamya and Şahinaz. The moment when she is at the mosque, which is a symbol of unity, she recognizes the differences, focusing: "I do not know who is next to me on the other side, whose arm is stroking my right arm..." (Aboulela 2005, 79). Through all these experiences, Najwa realizes that she is perceived as a potential threat because of her immigrant identity, for example when someone pours alcohol on her in the underground or when she notices how people, including Tamer, see her and others as "tall, young, Arab-looking, dark-eyed, and the herd, just like a terrorist" (Aboulela 2005, 101–105). She gradually accepts the reality of her current life as an immigrant in London, "… where our presence irks people" (Aboulela 2005, 111). These everyday encounters show how broader discourses of race and religion are translated into ordinary interactions and shape Najwa's sense of herself in the public sphere. In line with Mohanty's (2003) emphasis on the politics of representation in transnational feminist theory, such moments function as a critique of how dominant representations in the Global North construct racialized and religious identities, shaping exclusionary and oppressive narratives that affect the self-image and agency of marginalized subjects. Arun Kundnani (2007, 180) explains the period after the 9/11 attacks as "a climate of hatred and fear, directed especially at Muslim and migrant communities, and the erosion of the human rights of those whose cultures and values are perceived as 'alien'." Aboulela criticizes the stereotyping of Najwa, who is considered a "threat," and shows how transnational Muslim women deal with identities that are shaped by fear, exclusion, and racialized representation in the Global North. The sections depicting Najwa's immigrant years in London mark a transition in her identity construction within a faith framework that provides a shared sense of belonging and community. Najwa finds solidarity within the Muslim community in London, particularly through the mosque and her interactions with other women, as stated: "Ramadan had brought us close together. For a month, the mosque was full of people. We were making an effort, sloughing off our faults, and quieted down with hunger." (Aboulela 2005, 187). From Mohanty's (2003, 236) perspective, this process is an example of how immigrant women can rebuild their identities by navigating and negotiating their unique and everyday experiences, ultimately finding strength and solidarity in shared spaces such as faith.

The final chapter, in which Aboulela describes Najwa's past, sheds light on how she constructs her identity as an immigrant. In particular, her reunion with Anwar and his political views and cultural attitudes shows the intersection of Najwa's gender identity and her immigrant experiences. Uncertainty and challenges mark this period, along with a sense of loss, as she notes that "London remained the same, constant, consistent… For

the first time in my life, I disliked London and envied the English, who were so unwavering and grounded, never shifted, and were never confused" (Aboulela 2005, 174). This moment shows how deeply Najwa feels the emotional weight of being uprooted—her confusion and sense of not belonging mark the very start of her understanding that identity in diaspora is something she lives, negotiates, and reshapes with each loss and shift she faces. In the context of Spivak's subalternity (1988), Najwa stays unheard and marginalized, lacking the structural means to voice her perspective while living as a colonized subject in the land of the colonizers. While Spivak (1988) highlights the deep silencing of subaltern women in postcolonial contexts, Mohanty (2003) offers a complementary view. According to Mohanty (2003, 8), these moments can mark the start of decolonization, in which "self-reflexive collective practice" enables self-definition, independence, and liberation. Building on Najwa's developing sense of faith and community, her refusal of Tamer's marriage proposal and her decision to accept money to go on hajj are key acts of her personal agency and self-discovery. This choice marks a turning point and shows Najwa's move away from externally imposed expectations toward self-identity amid the challenges of relocation, cultural clashes, and faith (Hall 1990, 222). Najwa's decision to follow her own path, to step away from what others expect and to hold on to the faith and calm she chooses for herself, shows how her identity grows into a transnational one shaped by the movements she lives through, the dislocations she endures, and the quiet moments in which she begins to name who she is across different worlds.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that in *Minaret*, Leila Aboulela illustrates precisely how Najwa's identity, characterized by the intersection of everyday experiences, displacement, and global power dynamics, affects the fluidity of subjectivity. Within a transnational feminist framework centered on Mohanty (2003), Najwa's story highlights the efficacy of solidarity, community environment, and cultural specificity in fostering agency. By foregrounding these dynamics, the novel makes clear that identity is not a stable or fixed essence but an ongoing process shaped by historical, emotional, and geopolitical circumstances. After immigrating to London and understanding her father's absence as a symbol of patriarchal privilege and globalization, Najwa's unequivocal rejection of traditional norms and affirmation of her own choices illustrate how Aboulela depicts Najwa's identity construction in a transnational context. This turning point marks a shift from Najwa's privileged birth to her realization that displacement alters her sense of belonging, her ability to act, and the meanings she attributes to being a woman. In this respect, the novel serves as a representative case for examining how identity construction can be analyzed beyond Eurocentric models, particularly through the interplay of displacement, cultural specificity, and the transnational dynamics that shape women's lived experiences. Additionally, Aboulela's portrayal of Najwa as a racialized Muslim woman in post-9/11 London underscores the continued relevance of transnational feminism in

addressing Islamophobia and the politics of representation in global contexts. Her experiences with racialized suspicion, tracking, and misrecognition reveal how global discourses of fear and cultural otherness actively influence the daily lives of diasporic Muslim women. Overall, this study reinforces the idea that Aboulela's work is a remarkable example of how fiction can elucidate feminist philosophy by linking personal narratives to broader socio-political situations. The novel highlights that Najwa's inner experiences of self-discovery, loss, faith, and resilience are inextricably linked to wider social constructs of race, religion, class, and global mobility. Further studies could build upon this analysis by exploring the experiences of other characters in *Minaret* or examining similar themes across different diasporic narratives to deepen the understanding of identity construction and transnational feminism.

References

Aboulela, Leila. 2005**.** *Minaret.* New York: Black Cat.

Bhandari, Nagendra Bahadur. 2021. "Diaspora and Cultural Identity: A Conceptual Review." Journal of Political Science 21 (February): 100–108. doi:10.3126/jps.v21i0.35268.

Branaman, Ann. 2020. "Feminism and Identity." In *The Routledge Handbook of Identity Studies*, edited by Anthony Elliott, 46–65. London: Routledge.

Chambers, C. 2009. "An Interview with Leila Aboulela." *Contemporary Women's Writing* 3 (1): 86–102. doi:10.1093/cww/vpp003.

Chapparban, Sajaudeen Nijamodeen. 2024. "Challenges to Muslim Identity in Transnational Spaces: A Comparative Study of Diaspora Fictions after 9/11." In *Transnational Islam and Muslim Politics: Policies, Identities, and Ideologies*, edited by Ahmet Köroğlu and Baptiste Brodard, 149–171. Istanbul University Press. https://doi.org/10.26650/B/SS30AA25.2024.003.009

Conway, J. M. 2019. "The transnational turn: Looking back and looking ahead." In the *American Psychological Association eBooks*. 43–60.

https://doi.org/10.1037/0000148-003

Elliott, Anthony, ed. 2020. *Routledge Handbook of Identity Studies*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

Enns, Carolyn Zerbe, Lillian Comas Díaz, and Thema Bryant-Davis. 2020. "Transnational Feminist Theory and Practice: An Introduction." *Women & Therapy* 44 (1–2): 11–26. doi:10.1080/02703149.2020.1774997.

Hall, Stuart. 1990. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." In *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, edited by Jonathan Rutherford, 222–237. London: Lawrence & Wishart.

Hassan, Waïl S. 2008**.** "Leila Aboulela and the Ideology of Muslim Immigrant Fiction." *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 41 (2–3): 298–319. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40267740

Hekman, Susan. 2000. "Beyond Identity." *Feminist Theory* 1 (3): 289–308. doi:10.1177/14647000022229245.

Heywood, Leslie, and Jennifer Drake, eds. *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism*. NED-New edition. University of Minnesota Press, 1997. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttv3bd.

Kundnani, Arun. 2007. *The End of Tolerance: Racism in 21st-Century Britain*. Pluto P Press.

Mason, Corinne L. 2020. "Transnational Feminism." In *Comfort Women Activism*. 1st ed. Hong Kong University Press. 62–89. https://doi.org/10.2307/J.CTV18B5C1T.10

McEwan, Cheryl. 2001. "Postcolonialism, Feminism and Development: Intersections and Dilemmas." *Progress in Development Studies* 1 (2): 93–111. doi:10.1177/146499340100100201.

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. 2003**.** *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.Morgan, Robin. 1996. *Sisterhood Is Global: The International Women's Movement Anthology*—Feminist Press at CUNY.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1988. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, 271–313. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Tambe, Ashwini, and Millie Thayer, eds. 2021. *Transnational Feminist Itineraries: Situating Theory and Activist Practice*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Tong, Rosemarie. 2009. *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction*. *Westview Press*. Third. Boulder, CO: Westview Press. https://xyonline.net/sites/xyonline.net/files/201908/Tong%2C%20Feminist%20thought%20-%20a%20more%20comprehensive%20introduction%20%282009%29.pdf.

Zulfiqar, Sadia. 2024. "Leila Aboulela, Islam, and the Trajectory of the African Novel." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 60 (5): 578–90. doi:10.1080/17449855.2024.2415671.