

# ***Minaret and My Name is Salma: Female Muslim Identity in Postcolonial Trauma Novels*<sup>(\*)</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

Postcolonial trauma novels are interdisciplinary novels where postcolonial, trauma, memory and cultural studies intersect. Thus, postcolonial trauma fiction are narratives that discuss the impact of colonisation through self-representation and usage of the recurrent themes and styles of trauma theory. Trauma narratives serve many ends: first, they show the frequency of trauma as a multi-contextual social issue that results from different experiences. Second, they raise questions about how the individuals deal with loss and fragmentation. Third, they highlight how the surrounding environment is responsible for helping in the healing process of the traumatised and how trauma reproduces itself if not attended. Moreover, they invoke readers not only to bear testimony but also to act. Seen in this light, this paper examines Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005) and Fadia Faqir's *My Name is Salma* (2007) as trauma narratives where common traumatic experiences in the Arab world, such as political instability and honour killings lead to fragmentation, exile and alienation. The traumas of the female protagonists are depicted as common predicaments of Arab women immigrants in the West that affect their sense of subjectivity due to colonial history. *Minaret* and *My Name is Salma* are read as semi- autobiographical novels that echo some of the aspects in the lives of their writers. The novels represent the identity formation/ reformation in their homelands and host lands. The role of memory and the community in the protagonists' traumatic experiences is a major point of focus in both novels.

### **Keywords:**

Postcolonial Trauma novels, *Minaret*, *My Name is Salma*, Muslim Identity, cultural studies

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### الملخص

تجمع روايات صدمة ما بعد الاستعمار بين تخصصات شتى منها نظرية الصدمة وما بعد الاستعمار والدراسات الثقافية ودراسات الذاكرة. وعليه يهتم أدب صدمة ما بعد الاستعمار على إبراز مآسي الاستعمار من خلال تمثيلات النفس ومحاكاة أساليب نظرية الصدمة. وتعمل روايات الصدمة على إظهار تعدد السياقات للصدمة ودراسة كيفية تعامل الأشخاص مع الفقد وتبلور أهمية المجتمع المحيط وتأثيرهم السلبي أو الإيجابي على الأشخاص المصدومة؛ مما يجعلها ليست فقط لجذب انتباه القراء بل تلقي على عاتقهم مسؤولية المساعدة. هذا البحث يفحص روايتي المئذنة لليلي ابو العلا (٢٠٠٥) واسمي سلمى لفاديا فقير (٢٠٠٧) كأمثلة لروايات صدمة ما بعد الاستعمار من خلال إبرازهم تجارب صادمة في بلادهم العربية ومعاناة اللاجئين في الغرب؛ ولذلك تسلط الكاتبان الضوء على صدمات بطلتي الروائيتين كمعضلات متكررة بالنسبة للاجئات العرب المسلمات في الغرب؛ مما يؤثر على شعورهن بالذاتية وذلك نتيجة للخطاب الإمبريالي. كما يتم توضيح أن هاتين الروائيتين بمثابة سيرة ذاتية للكاتبتين لما فيهما من ملامح مشابهة لحياتهما. ويدرس البحث تشكيل وإعادة تشكيل هوية البطلتين في كل من البلد الأم والمضيف كما يتم إبراز دور الذاكرة والمجتمع المحيط في مراعاة تجاربهما المأسوية في البلدين.

### الكلمات المفتاحية

روايات صدمة ما بعد الاستعمار، رواية المئذنة، رواية اسمي سلمى، الهوية الإسلامية، الدراسات الثقافية

Postcolonial trauma novels are interdisciplinary novels where postcolonial, trauma, memory and cultural studies intersect. Whitehead asserts, "Trauma fiction overlaps with postcolonial fiction in its concern with the recovery of memory and the acknowledgement of the denied, the repressed and the forgotten" (2004, 82). Likewise, Ogaga Ifowodo sees that postcolonial literary texts emerge as a means of self-representation (2013, v). Thus, postcolonial trauma novels are narratives that depict the impact of colonisation through self-representation and usage of trauma theory.

Laurie Vickroy elucidates that trauma narratives serve many ends. First, they show the frequency of trauma as a multi-contextual social

issue that results from different experiences. Second, they raise questions about how the individuals deal with loss and fragmentation. Third, they highlight how the surrounding environment is responsible for helping in the healing process of the traumatised and how trauma reproduces itself if not attended (2002, 2-3). Moreover, Stef Craps highlights the importance of trauma narratives in driving readers not only to bear testimony but also to take action: “Rather than inviting the reader to become a vicarious victim, these texts denounce and fight the indifference of a privileged and empowered Western public to the suffering of the racial, ethnic, or cultural other” (2013, 42). Seen in this light, this paper examines Leila Aboulela’s *Minaret* (2005) and Fadia Faqir’s *My Name is Salma* (2007) as trauma narratives where common traumatic experiences in the Arab world, such as political instability and honour killings, lead to fragmentation, exile and alienation. The traumas of the female protagonists are depicted as common predicaments of Arab women immigrants in the West that affect their sense of subjectivity due to colonial history.

*Minaret* and *My Name is Salma* are read as semi-autobiographical novels. According to Aboulela, *Minaret* is inspired by her life in London, and especially Regents Park Area. She explains how Aboulela’s faith has affected her life in Sudan and later in London and how in the West she has found freedom to practice her religion (Aboulela, 2020, *Minaret*-Inspiration). Likewise, Faqir states that, “Salma is me and not me,” since like Salma, she lost her child’s custody and had to endure the suffering of her boy growing up away from her (Bower, 2012, 5). The novels represent the identity formation/reformation in their homelands and host lands. The role of memory and the community in the protagonists’ traumatic experiences is a major point of focus in both novels.

Najwa in *Minaret* and Salma in *My Name is Salma* leave their homelands -Sudan and Jordan respectively- in fear of their lives, seeking refuge in their host country, England. Their traumas begin in their homelands and escalate when they are driven out of their Arab countries to the West. Najwa suddenly flees out of Sudan at night after a political

upheaval that throws her father and the government out of power and her father is later executed. She escapes along with her mother and her brother. Similarly, Salma escapes honour killing in Hima, Jordan; she is jailed for eight years in protective custody during which she gives birth to a girl out of wedlock who is immediately taken away from her. Later, Salma is adopted by an English Christian nun and smuggled out of the country to England<sup>(1)</sup>. The characters' traumatising experiences can be traced through, first, their physical journeys in both their homelands and host country and, second, through their psychological journeys between the past and present via memories.

Ronald Granofsky argues that trauma narratives are laden with symbolic depictions that are the vehicles that link the individual ordeals with collective traumas; moreover, symbolism serves to generalise the experience to appeal to a wide audience (1995, 6). He further elaborates that trauma narratives are a "symbolic effort to mime the effects of trauma itself in the fiction" (ibid., 132). Thus, the unfolding of the narratives in terms of flashbacks reinforces the effect of the protagonists' traumas. Furthermore, both characters' psychological states can be traced along Granofsky's three stages of trauma response: regression, fragmentation and reconciliation (ibid., 18).

Moreover, Whitehead emphasises that "Novelists have frequently found that the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterized by repetition and indirection" (2004, 3). *Minaret and My Name is Salma* share the same narrative techniques that focus on mimicking the traumatic experiences either through fragmentation or repetition. The narratives tend to move in a circular motion that highlights the inescapability of traumatic effects. The protagonists' traumas in their homelands manifest themselves after the characters move in time and space. Traumatic memories are depicted either as intense emotions without memory of the trauma or as memory of the trauma without emotions (Herman, 1992, 35). The fragments of past events that are related to the protagonists' lives in their homelands,

where their individual traumas take place, reveal the exposure to traumatic experiences that are further intensified by their present ordeals. Flashbacks take them back to the time and space of traumas when a stimulus is available which marks, what Granofsky calls, “Regression in time” (1995, 35).

The sudden shifts between the past and present events in the narratives show the intrusive nature of traumatic memories. The flashback narrative technique reinforces the two elements of the traumatic experience: first, the gravity of the incident itself that is not fully lived as it occurs; second, the belated effect of the realisation of the impacts of the trauma on the psyche. Cathy Caruth remarks that, “What one returns to in the flashbacks is not the incomprehensibility of one’s near death, but the very incomprehensibility of one’s own survival” (1996, 64).

*Minaret* begins in London in 2003 with a prologue entitled “*Bism Allah, Ar-rahman, Ar-raheem*” (Aboulela, 2005, 1). The heading of the prologue as well as the title of the novel highlight the theme of cultural identity that dominates the novel. Aboulela, through her protagonist Najwa, highlights the importance of Islam as a faith. Moreover, she echoes the recurrent debates about immigrant Muslim identity in the West during the 1990s. Najwa in *Minaret* starts her narrative by saying, “I’ve come *down* in the world. I’ve slid to a place where the ceiling is *low* and there isn’t much room to move” (ibid. [emphasis added]). Najwa, who comes from a rich and powerful family, lives through her traumatising social and financial deterioration. Her words “come down” mark her understanding of her status; yet she cannot openly declare that she is a servant. She describes her degraded state through representation of interior space that connotes confinement when she says, “The ceiling is low and there isn’t much room to move”, as well as loss when she mentions exterior space depicting herself “standing in a street” without identifying it (ibid.). The novel begins near the end of her story where she has learnt to “accept” her “sentence”. However, looking at her status

as a “sentence” connotes a yielding rather than acceptance which is even clarified as she states that “a shift” provokes the past (ibid.).

Najwa suppresses any thoughts related to her past in order to deliberately forget; however, this evasion leads to deliberate remembering. As Astrid Erll explains, “Remembering and forgetting are two sides – or different processes – of the same coin, that is, memory. Forgetting is the very condition for remembering” (2011, 8). Najwa’s fragmentation and in-between state are symbolically projected in the atmosphere around her for autumn is an in-between season that is full of change. Najwa’s constant fears of new beginnings is a state of hyperarousal; as she narrates, “a new start makes me conscious of what I’ve become” (Aboulela, 2005, 1). Her state is understood in light of Herman’s explanation, “In this state of hyperarousal, which is the first cardinal symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder, the traumatized person startles easily, reacts irritably to small provocation, and sleeps poorly” (Herman, 1992, 35). The only solid landmark around Najwa is the minaret of the mosque that stands out above the trees, symbolising her religious identity and foreshadowing the role of faith in her life. The beginning of the novel thus conveys Najwa’s insecurity as a result of her traumatic experience.

Similarly, the narrative technique in Faqir’s *My Name is Salma* flows between her past and present, resembling how Salma’s traumatic experience ebbs and flows in her present life. The titles of the novel and its chapters assert the cultural identity of the Arab protagonist. Salma is introduced with her Arabic Muslim name despite the fact that the novel begins with her being in England as Sally Asher. The first chapter entitled “Where the River Meets the Sea” stands for how Miss Asher -the nun who adopts Salma- describes Southampton, the port in England, to her (Faqir, 2007, 22). It also introduces the water motif that runs through the narrative as it signifies the fluidity of Salma’s character as well as her continuous need for cleansing and purification. Furthermore, the meeting point between the river and the sea connotes the in-between state that

Salma occupies; she is caught between two different cultures and identities to which she does not belong.

Salma starts her narrative in England after years of leaving her country. “It was a *new day*, but the dewy greenness of the hills, the whiteness of the sheep, the greyness of the skies carried me to my *distant past*, to a small mud village tucked *away* between the *deserted* hills, to Hima” (Faqir, 2007, 7 [emphasis added]). The narrative starts in the present moment in Exeter, England; however, the scenery reminds Salma of her past identity as a shepherdess in her homeland, Hima. The atmosphere gives the impression that the present, which is wrapped in dew, is like a hazy, blurred dream, contrary to Hima which is “gleaming” and real (ibid.). Salma’s trauma manifests itself in how her past is more vivid and constantly intrudes on her present moment. She associates her homeland with being “deserted” reflecting how she was forced to leave against her will.

In contrast to Najwa in *Minaret* who comes from the upper class, Salma is brought up in a traditional Bedouin community. She is confined by her natural surroundings, the mountains and the river, and her patriarchal family that abides by the chauvinistic rules of tribal life. As a devastated person, Salma feels unworthy of living, stating, “If this small glass bottle were full of snake venom I would drink it in one go.... My number was up a long time ago, but for some reason I was living on borrowed time” (Faqir, 2007, 8-9). She feels she deserves to die because she has humiliated herself and her family and she is punished by losing her daughter. Going past HM prison in her neighbourhood, she feels that she is “on the wrong side of the black iron gate” (ibid.). Her evident fragmentation shows as she clearly states, “Salma resisted, but Sally must adapt” (ibid., 9). Salma, like Najwa, is suspended in an in-between state that tears her between the present and the past.

The narratives’ beginnings thus highlight the continuous shift in time and space anchored in the intrusive element of traumatic memories. As Caruth highlights, “the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another

time” (1995, 8), establishing the link between trauma, memory, space and identity. As postcolonial traumatic figures, both protagonists suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) which causes their “intrusive thoughts, such as flashbacks and nightmares, emotional numbing, avoidance of reminders of the event, and hyperarousal, such as increased startle and irritability” (Ayers, 2007, 254).

### **Traumatisation in the Homeland**

The first part narrates Najwa’s life in Khartoum and the political coup that brings her life to pieces. In Sudan, Najwa’s life is characterised by a liberal lifestyle: she studies in English, she is unveiled; she goes out often to discos and clubs and has male and female friends. She attends Khartoum University and is free to drive a car whenever needed; besides, her summer vacation is usually in England or Cairo. Though as a high-class girl she is free of social and financial confinements, she has to abide by the traditional gender decorum and act according to the stereotypical frame of an Arab female. She is thus, expected to be quiet and obedient and her actions are governed by cultural appropriateness (Aboulela, 2005, 13). However, through Najwa, Aboulela questions the preconceived notion of male superiority in the Arab cultures. Moreover, she answers back to the Western feminist allegations that Arab women are seen as inferior to men by contrasting Najwa’s character to that of her twin brother and how she is the one responsible for him not the other way round.

Religion plays a pivotal role in the Sudanese culture; thus, Najwa’s personal set of values are shaken as she is stranded between her rich liberal upbringing and traditional Muslim community. The colonial legacy that ascribes Islam to regression drives Najwa to look down upon her Muslim identity (Ahmed, 1992, 150). Thus, in a conversation between Najwa and her friend Randa, both repeat the same anti-Islamic colonial discourse they derive from the “*Times*” magazine. When Najwa sees a picture of “Khomeini, the Iran-Iraq War, girls marching in black chadors,” her friend is quick to resent it saying, “Totally retarded,” and continues to lament the fact that “We’re supposed to go forward, not go

back to the Middle Ages.... Islam doesn't say you should do that" (Aboulela, 2005, 29). They reiterate how the West sees the Khomeini Revolution and how Arab cultures and customs are manipulated by "colonial feminism" to make Muslims uncomfortable with their religion (Ahmed, 1992. 151). Besides, Najwa responds, "'What do we know? We don't even pray.' Sometimes I was struck with guilt" (ibid.). Najwa knows that her problem is shared among her peers, yet her guilt is not, which is reflected in how she uses the plural personal "we" before she shifts to the singular pronoun "I".

Najwa faces another traumatising experience in Sudan which is her relationship with Anwar, the communist student. She sees that their relationship is doomed to fail because they are completely different. She believes in the integrity of her father while he calls him corrupt and asks for his punishment. Anwar plays the role of an eye opener for Najwa as when he questions her way of life and her social and economic status, she sees the other side of the story. She realises that her oblivious lifestyle in Sudan has detached her from her Sudanese Muslim identity intensifying her trauma.

In *My Name is Salma*, Salma's set of personal beliefs are shaped by her Arab Bedouin culture; however, her wild and dreamy nature is what drives her to give in to Hamdan's love. As a shepherdess, Salma is very much at home amongst the mountains. She realises that her "dark deeds" and "shameful past" "had smeared the foreheads of [her] family with tar" (Faqir, 2007, 8-9). Fornication is not only seen as religiously forbidden and individually punished but as a cultural taboo as well. The whole family is thus perceived as responsible and, therefore, loses its reputation. As Salma states, "Il 'aar ma yimhiyeh ila il dam: dishonour can only be wiped off with blood" (ibid., 327).

Faqir criticises the closed community of Hima that is ruled by cultural beliefs rather than religious teachings. Salma perceives that her community's religious practices are socially constructed and not spiritually anchored (Faqir, 2007, 19). The same notion applies to honour killing as a patriarchal practice. According to the Quranic text an act such

as fornication is not punishable by killing, and both the male and the female are equally held responsible. On the personal level, however, Salma's identity is shaken as she betrays herself and her family when she yields to Hamdan. As to the social level, she becomes an outcast by breaking the codes of honour and humiliating her family.

Salma's trauma escalates when her illegitimate child is instantly taken away from her while she is in prison. Despite her guilt of engaging in a sexual relation out of wedlock, losing her child is the final straw that breaks her. Her individual trauma is intensified when she keeps blaming herself for not only failing to be a mother but also for jeopardising her daughter's life, since her patriarchal Bedouin culture would definitely kill the baby. As she puts it, "I deserved to be mocked, beaten, even killed. I abandoned her, let them take her away" (Faqir, 2007, 41). Salma is thus prone to feel guilty; "She [her daughter] was out there crying for me" (Faqir, 2007, 78). Judith Herman explains the effect of traumatic occurrences: "In the aftermath of traumatic events, as survivors review and judge their own conduct, feelings of guilt and inferiority are practically universal" (1992, 48).

Moreover, as Herman argues "Traumatic events, once again, shatter the sense of connection between individual and community, creating a crisis of faith" (1992, 49). Hence, Salma echoes her doubts about religion and God saying, "Completely mute and on hunger strike, I thought, while looking at the reflection of the moonlight on the barred window, about God" (Faqir, 2007, 136). She sees the contradiction between God's mercy and how He does not miraculously intervene to resolve her situation. She knows that her plight is mainly because of her own deeds; however, she wonders why God does not revenge the people's wrong cultural practices. In spite of her doubts, she does not reject religion; she blames her people or her culture using the pronoun "they" (*ibid.*). The recurrent image of the "barred window" reflects how her Muslim identity is shaken but she does not lose faith.

Salma shows signs of traumatic regression after she gives birth. Granofsky defines it as a form of escape; he elaborates that it connotes,

“a non-integrated and hence primitive state of existence” (1995, 65). Salma detaches herself from the surrounding environment to escape facing her reality. She narrates, “From then on I *did not speak* or have a whiff of sleep. I would just sit in the *dark* prison room, *leaning on the wall* and watching the sky through the high barred window.... I remained *curled up in the dark* until the inmates forgot that I was there wide awake and sore” (Faqir, 2007, 158 [emphasis added]). Salma retreats to an embryo like stage; she is curled up and refuses to eat, sleep or talk. Her state mimics that of her abandoned child as she feels that no one will care for her illegitimate child.

The importance of the social context in healing individual traumas is highlighted by Herman. As she puts it, “A secure sense of connection with caring people is the foundation of personality development. When this connection is shattered, the traumatized person loses her basic sense of self” (1992, 48). Seen in this light, both protagonists lose their status in their homelands and are detached from their close connections and familiar surroundings. Their identities and sense of belonging are ruined as they face the devastating aftermath of their traumatic experiences. Furthermore, they are forced to flee their countries to a foreign culture with no secure connections.

### **Traumatisation in the Host Land**

The physical journey of both protagonists from their homelands to England is depicted differently. On the one hand, Aboulela does not discuss Najwa’s seemingly easy flight to England because she first arrives to the host land as a rich visitor and her visa is valid. As she does not realise the aftermath of the coup that throws her father out of power, she thinks of her escape to London just as an early summer vacation (Aboulela, 2005, 56). Nonetheless, Najwa feels shame and doubt which characterise her traumatic experience as she suffers from unspeakable thoughts about her circumstances. She ponders, “But what if it didn’t turn out to be OK, I wanted to say. What if they found him guilty, what if he *was* guilty, what then? As if I understood what they were trying him for ... Corruption” (ibid., 58). Najwa’s traumatic change makes her feel

helpless. She further speculates the probability of finding him guilty. She doubts her father although it is not the first time she witnesses accusations against him (ibid., 38).

Najwa's realisation of the catastrophe comes after her father is hanged and the situation becomes irreversible. As she remembers:

There are all kinds of *pain, degrees of falling*. In *our* first weeks in London *we* [her mother, brother and herself] sensed the ground tremble beneath us. When *Baba was found* guilty we broke down...When *Baba was hanged*, the earth we were standing on split open and we tumbled *down* and tumbling had *no end*, it seemed to have no end, as if we would *fall and fall* for eternity without landing. As if this was our punishment, a bottomless pit, the roar of each other's screams. We became *unfamiliar to each other simply because we had not seen each other fall before*. (Aboulela, 2005, 61; emphasis added)

The above quotation comes at the end of part one marking Najwa's traumatic regression that is represented through the falling metaphor. Najwa's social status, financial stability and cultural surroundings are shattered. Instead of being a tourist in England, she becomes an asylum seeker and the glamorous perspective of London as a summer vacation soon fades away as it becomes a land of exile. Trauma thus affects Najwa's sense of being and changes her perception. Being foreign and feeling alienated from one's surrounding are the effects of her unstable psychological status that make her experience an identity crisis.

Her father's execution traumatises the whole family as her mother soon dies of an illness and her brother takes to drugs and is jailed. Moreover, it marks a new phase of helplessness and loss of agency that is highlighted through the shift from the active voice "we sensed" to the passive voice "was found guilty, was hanged" (Aboulela, 2005, 61). Najwa's financial loss drives her to work as a helper at the house of a friend of her father's in London. Afterwards, she succumbs to her social deterioration and works as a servant for a stranger. The loss of identity

she faces at home is carried along to her life in London and its impact slowly escalates her identity crisis and feeling of emptiness.

In a similar vein, the traumatic sense of loss is experienced by Salma in *My Name is Salma*. However, on the other hand, Salma's escape journey is hard; she first goes to a Lebanon convent, then to Cypress and finally she reaches England. On her journey, she continues to suffer from regression as she is reduced to a child whose whole life is reconstructed. Her identity reformation manifests itself as Miss Asher, the English nun who adopts her, changes her name to Sally Asher, gives her different clothing, and teaches her Christian beliefs as well as English (Faqir, 2007, 122, 190). She also endures many hardships to enter the country because of the discrimination against asylum seekers and refugees.

In England, Salma's trauma is doubled because she suffers not only from losing her daughter but also from losing herself. The trauma continues with her as she is taken out of her country to England carrying along with her fantasies about her daughter and growing feelings of shame and guilt which she has to endure all by herself. Salma narrates her arrival at Southampton port detention centre where the immigration officer treats her like a criminal and handcuffs her (Faqir, 2007, 148). Miss Asher has to go to court to free her because the "adoption papers were in order but the immigration authorities questioned their authenticity" (ibid., 162). As Marion C. Aichberger rightly explains, "The experiences prior and during migration may put refugees and asylum seekers under particular risk for the deterioration of mental health" (2015, 34). Salma's detention for two months intensifies her traumatic experience; she narrates, "No, it was not easy living here in England as an 'alien', which was how the immigration officer had described me" (Faqir, 2007, 37).

As a result, Salma is at a loss because she has not been prepared to be all by herself especially after the hostility she encounters in the host land stating, "There was a huge difference between the port room and the prison room I had left behind: this room was spotless ... but I was in

*solitary*” (Faqir, 2007, 149 [emphasis added]). Her words do not only describe the physical differences between the two confinements as Islah Prison has “dirty walls” and an only “high barred window”, but also explain the mental picture ascribed to them (ibid., 158). The emotional and psychological support that has helped Salma in the prison room is no longer there and she has to face her trauma alone.

Through Salma, Faqir criticises both settings; first, she condemns the oppressive patriarchal practices against women as well as the poor conditions of the prison in Hima, and second, she points out the loneliness and alienation refugees suffer from in England. Faqir denounces the English obstinate attitude because as Mister Mahoney, Salma’s lawyer and first host, puts it, “if you send her back she will be shot on sight” (Faqir, 2007, 162). Faqir, further, highlights the fact that the host country does not offer a secure or welcoming place for the immigrants to survive their traumas. On the contrary, it adds to their sense of loneliness and helplessness which leads to further psychological traumas.

The harsh experiences refugees go through either in escaping their traumas in the homeland or trying to survive in a hostile host country often lead to further psychological ailments. İnci User explains the unacceptance and prejudice refugees face stating, “In many countries, governments try to discourage refugees and asylum seekers and apply harsh policies of deterrence which may add to the existing traumatic symptoms of these people” (2015, 124). Both narratives speak of a collective trauma experienced by Arab Muslim women in contemporary England. Najwa and Salma suffer in order to come to terms with a culture and community completely different from their own. Duncan Pedersen states that, “society and culture assign significance and attach meanings to the traumatic event, which can give to and make sense of the traumatic experience, so that in turn it could somehow mitigate, reduce or even amplify its impact” (2015, 12). Pedersen highlights the importance of the environment surrounding the traumatised because it, first, affects how the victims of trauma see their plight; second, it helps in the healing

process<sup>(2)</sup>. Western society is oblivious to the suffering of Arab Muslim immigrants who are lost in a country that is different than their own and a new culture that does not share their deeply rooted set of beliefs.

Aboulela's protagonist carries with her the trauma of being exiled due to Sudan's postcolonial political instability. Similarly, Anwar, the left-wing activist who is always "uncomfortable under the gaze of anyone white," is also a political asylum seeker who is driven out of Sudan as the regime keeps changing (Aboulela, 2005, 168). From a Fanonian perspective, Anwar notes that, "here no one knows our background, no one knows whose daughter you are, no one knows my politics. We are both niggers, equals" (ibid., 157). Through these words, Aboulela shows the aftermath of many years of colonialism. The comparison between their position as asylum seekers and "niggers" is telling of the colonial legacy Africa suffers from. Furthermore, it highlights the fact that their existence is inconsequential as "no one knows" or cares about their predicament. The society at large does not address Najwa's individual trauma. London, with all its possibilities, fails to embrace her as an asylum seeker and offer her solidarity.

Najwa speaks out her mind after she hears the news about Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait:

That is 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 in my life, I was conscious of *my shitty-coloured skin* next to their placid paleness. (Aboulela, 2005, 174 [emphasis added])

Again, there is parallelism between the colour of the skin and Najwa's plight of being obligatorily displaced; she associates her suffering with her coloured identity which explains why she sees being white as placid in contrast to her perturbed life. Najwa's unreasonable agitation when she is startled at the news of another political upheaval is a symptom of

PTSD. This self-confrontation with her difference from her surroundings brings her closer to knowing her psychological ailment which is the emptiness she feels inside due to her physical and psychological fragmentation. In this light, Granofsky's theory explains that "fragmentation may be the result of a 'shattering' experience" (1995, 108).

Najwa's "shitty coloured" is also echoed in how Faqir's Salma always sees herself as dark (Aboulela, 2005, 174). Salma is constantly aware of her dark skin noting that "Most hair colour was designed for blondes .... Yesterday a man was talking on the radio about '*institutional racism*'. He must have been referring to the *blondness* of it all" (Faqir, 2007, 51 [emphasis added]). As Phillips points out, institutional racism is a form of racism that is practised by social and political institutions in a covert manner that might be less perceptible than individual racism (2011, 173). Seen in this light, Salma criticises the fact that advertisements are only addressing blondes, which highlights that multicultural England is still dominated by the idea that the West is white. Such a racist attitude adopted by institutions acts as a centrifugal force that makes coloured people constantly conscious of their differences, leading to internalising the inferiority complex. Salma often fantasies about getting married to a white man, thus, metaphorically becoming white herself and hence accepted (Faqir, 2007, 52). Nevertheless, when she eventually marries a white man, she still feels dark; as she narrates, "There was nothing unusual about us apart from the darkness of my skin" (ibid., 299).

As immigrants, both protagonists suffer from an inferiority complex in the host land. Frantz Fanon's words in *Black Skin White Masks* are worthy of note in this respect; the inferiority complex may be the result of "the internalization-or, better, the epidermalization- of this inferiority" which is rooted in self-perception of the racial body seen through the eyes of others (1986, 13). Najwa and Salma suffer from the same plight as coloured people because they see themselves as different, thus inferior. Similarly, Levent Küey explains that "Internalised stigma

stimulates a vicious cycle of traumatising via lowered self-esteem and expectations, mixed emotions of anger and shame and frequently learned helplessness and a decrease in personal capacity and coping skills, in turn leading to an increase in the stigmatisation faced in the external environment” (2015, 65). Discrimination escalates the trauma of the victims who are already traumatised in their homelands and are seeking help and healing in the host land. Moreover, Ifowodo argues that “The psychological aspect of the wound of colonialism ... speaks more directly to the problem of postcolonial identity, of the struggle to recover individual and collective identities shattered by the massive blows of slavery and colonialism, than is generally acknowledged” (2013, 2).

Recent studies show that trauma cannot be studied away from culture because what is traumatic in one’s culture might not be considered of value in another culture. Lawrence J. Kirmayer elucidates that, “culture shapes the experience of suffering and healing” (2007, v). Hence, the host land’s culture affects how the immigrants deal with their predicaments and how their plight is seen by the surrounding community. Vickroy emphasises that “The environment of social relations and cultural values can be a source of trauma or a force that silences victims out of denial or guilt. It can create veils of illusion, attempts to mask or reinterpret behaviors that induce trauma” (2013, 131).

In contrast to Western culture, Arab culture lays emphasis on personal identity in relation to other members of the community, and religion is an integral part of the culture. Arab culture can be regarded as a collectivistic one which is defined by Nino Makhshvili and Lela Tsiskarishvili as “societies where the groups’ interests prevail over the individual ones. In collectivistic cultures, people share strong “We-identity” feelings” (2007, 247). The identity formation of Arab Muslim women is thus, the outcome of the interplay between religious, cultural and personal set of beliefs to produce individuals who are a mixture of all three elements. Both Faqir and Aboulela in this light discuss important themes like women’s Muslim identity, the hijab and woman’s modesty

from the religious and cultural perspectives to delineate how the West escalates the traumatic experiences of the immigrants.

Although Najwa and Salma live in the secular West and are free to do what they please with their bodies, they are bound by their cultures' traditions. Both characters feel guilty about having affairs; their guilt transcends the element of religion. Amena Amer et al. argue that British Arab Muslim women regard virginity as part of their identity. They write, "Positioning themselves as virgins went beyond simply honour; it was a significant cultural symbol that secured their sense of cultural identity. In fact this cultural identity was often so powerful that it overrode their Islamic identities, prescribing their behaviour even if religion was seen as more 'forgiving'" (2015, 3). Their argument rightly highlights the cultural aspect over the religious one because social practices scandalise girls while religion emphasises atonement. This is evident in both narratives as Najwa and Salma never overcome their sense of guilt because the cultural and religious aspects of their identities are never forsaken. They remain Arab Muslims and their presence in a different culture does not eliminate that; on the contrary, it highlights it.

In *Minaret*, Najwa narrates that right after her sexual relation with Anwar "We leapt up, scurrying, guilty. Yes, guilty" (Aboulela, 2005, 172). They are both conscious of the gravity of the deed they have done; Najwa comments, "the guilt didn't go away" (ibid., 175). Najwa is lost as she narrates, "This empty space was called freedom" (ibid.). Her sexual liberty is again regulated by her cultural Muslim identity, for she goes on with it on the hypothesis that it will end with her unquestionable marriage to Anwar.

Her sense of loss and fragmentation intensifies when she realises that the Holy month of Ramadan has started and she missed fasting. She is not convinced of Anwar and his friends' arguments that in London people should not fast because they are secular and consider fasting as a communal activity that exists in Sudan but not in the west (Aboulela, 2005, 231-2). Furthermore, her delusions about Anwar marrying her come to an end (ibid., 233). In the following days, she tries to fast but her

body does not obey her which makes her feel estranged and completely at a loss with herself (ibid., 235). Her final decision to end her relationship with Anwar and to go to the mosque helps her to come to new terms with herself (ibid., 237). Najwa thus, finds in her Muslim identity an anchor that she has not found in all other aspects of her life because when the “I” identity is shaken, the “We” identity is actualized (Makhashvili and Tsiskarishvili, 2007, 247). The atmosphere of the mosque is one that is familiar to her and to her cultural background. Therefore, seeing the mosque community as home is not only about religion, but also about finding a shared core identity that is stabilising.

The physical and psychological journeys Najwa goes through cause her self-image to change. Instead of the past westernised university girl, Najwa comes to identify herself as only a Muslim: “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. And now... I just think of myself as Muslim” (Aboulela, 2005, 110). Her surrender to her Muslim identity is thus an escape into the marginalised Muslim identity that endorses collectivity rather than individuality; she has become another Arab Muslim girl in London rather than Najwa the Sudanese asylum seeker.

Furthermore, Western contemporary controversial debates about the veil are worthy of note. Golnaz Golnaraghi and Kelly Dye point out that, “While feminist discourses define the veil as oppressive, others argue that the veil has become the embodiment of the Muslim woman’s agency and has created an empowering space” (2016, 140; See also Ahmed, 1992, 150; Kahf, 1999, 6). Aboulela in *Minaret* supports Golnaraghi and Dye’s findings that, “These women see the veil as liberating while offering respect and dignity. Specifically, the veil allows them to be seen not as sexual objects, but instead recognizes them for their ideas and intellect” (ibid.,144). Najwa adopts the same point of view when she wears the hijab; “Perhaps this was attractive in itself, the skill of concealing rather than emphasizing, to restrain rather than to offer.... The builders who had leered down at me from scaffoldings

couldn't see me any more. I was invisible and they were quiet” (Aboulela, 2005, 247).

In spite of the fact that Najwa seems content with her choice, there are many aspects related to her decision. Chambers remarks that the usage of the word ‘invisible’ is paradoxical because it can be read negatively (Chambers, 2011, 106). Nevertheless, Aboulela comments that she means it in a positive way, that Najwa does not have to put up with notions concerning the beauty of the female body to the gaze of men. This point of view resonates with Faqir’s criticism of the oppressive Western society that forces women to groom and beautify themselves in a certain manner which in turn makes the West as oppressive as the Arab world but in different manners (Moore, 2011, 5).

Partially Najwa’s choice to wear the hijab is a result of her trauma as she wishes to be a good Muslim; yet at the same time, as a traumatised figure she is happy to go unnoticed. Fanon’s words are worth mentioning in this respect, “I slip into corners, I remain silent, I strive for anonymity, for invisibility. Look, I will accept the lot, as long as no one notices me!” (Fanon, 1986, 116). Her choice to go unnoticed is a subconscious escape mechanism to overcome her trauma that manifests itself in low self-esteem and social withdrawal. As a victim of hate crime against Muslims, Najwa remains passive and escapes without confronting or fighting the perpetrators (Aboulela, 2005, 80-1).

Najwa’s attitude towards the Islamophobic attack speaks of an internalised submissiveness that accepts discrimination. It is also a symptom of PTSD as she feels numb towards the attack (Herman, 1992, 41). She is aware that she is the target of a physical assault that can be repeated; yet she does nothing except waiting it out. She is uncomfortable looking at her reflection in a manner that connotes distortion and splitting as if her reflection is not hers. She looks down as if it is her fault; the ‘shock’ is because of the cold sensation not because she is called ‘Muslim scum’ (Aboulela, 2005, 80-1). Najwa appears as a fragile character due to the annihilation of subjectivity that results from her traumas. Moreover, she is not the only one who is passive; the driver

and the other passengers abandon her too. Aware of the ongoing Islamophobia and racism, she realises she will not get help and passively internalises the stigma of being a Muslim in a country where Islam is under attack.

Similarly, Salma's identity in the West highlights her complete fragmentation and loss. Salma judges her new acquired Western habits and way of living from a Bedouin Muslim perspective which results in her complete loss of identity. Her choices of red make up and tight clothes as well as going out to pubs are ways to immerse herself in a mood that certainly does not fit her background; yet she does that on purpose to be detached from her past. As she puts it, "Those were the few precious moments of the evening when I forgot my past. Those moments when I looked at my reflection as if looking at a stranger were the best" (Faqir, 2007, 58). Her escape from her past is a way to repress facing her trauma which leads to more fragmentation (Granofsky, 1995, 100; Herman, 1992, 35). Memory that involves remembering and forgetting is significant in respect to trauma. Salma remembers her past; yet there is nothing she can do to make amends for it. Hence, in her unceasing endeavours to forget, she is consistently reminded of it. Moreover, even when she tries to forget her past and goes to a bar to find a man to spend the night with, she is reminded of her racial difference from the other girls as her looks are different marked by her "long dark frizzy hair and crooked nose" (Faqir, 2007, 187). This self-objectification and commodification are signifiers of disintegration. Salma is lost between not being able to be Salma Ibrahim because if she returns, she will be instantly killed, and not being accepted as Sally Asher who has an English name but is not English.

Ironically, Salma who escapes honour killing, is reckless with her sexual life. She thinks of these relationships as a means to feel accepted and escape her past stating, "All of that fumbling in the dark so that you would forget who you were for a few minutes" (Faqir, 2007, 104). However, the feelings of guilt and uncleanness linger: "You stay in bed next to him all night pretending to be content, asleep and all you wanted

to do was to jump up and wash your body with soap and water including your insides, do your ablutions then pray for forgiveness” (ibid., 80). Salma’s traumatic nature manifests itself in her need to forget and her inability to do so; her Arab culture dictates her thoughts and feelings, yet she refuses to be part of it.

Salma’s religious identity is depicted as interwoven with her Arab cultural one. On her way to England, she tells Miss Asher, “I cannot take off veil, Sister. *My country, my language, my daughter*. No piece of cloth. Feel *naked*, me” (Faqir, 2007, 189 [emphasis added]). Salma’s conception about the veil is linked to her homeland and her language which are indicators of cultural identity. She is again oppressed by the Western culture that encourages anti-Muslim sentiments. Urging Salma to stop wearing her scarf in order to be able to find a job, Parvin tells her, “It will be much harder to get a job while you insist on wearing it” (ibid., 123). In this light, the veil does not only hinder Muslim women from being employed; it also categorises them as backward and submissive. As Danielle Dunand Zimmerman highlights, “Muslim women are more targeted by exclusion and discrimination than Muslim men, as women wearing the hijab are perceived as a foreign cultural threat to Western modernity” (2015, 145). In contrast to her strong initial sentiments about taking off her veil, Salma changes her mind after living in England and facing racism (Faqir, 2007, 129).

Despite the fact that Najwa and Salma share the same individual traumas their stories end differently. Najwa chooses her Muslim identity as an anchor as it is only in the Muslim community of the mosque that she finds a sense of belonging. Moreover, she is ready to face the stigma of being a Muslim in a secular society provided that she is surrounded by people who share the same identity with her. Aboulela refutes the notion that Najwa loses agency; she highlights the fact that, “In *Minaret*... at the end she’s relying on her faith rather than a career” (qtd. in Chambers, 2011, 113). Consequently, her faith is her means of resistance.

However, as a postcolonial trauma narrative, the ending of the novel renders itself to ambivalence as it mimics the trauma itself. Despite

finding her identity in religion, Najwa feels that her life is fragmented, which she compares to one of her friends in the mosque saying: “I am touched by her life, it moves forward, pulses and springs. There is no fragmentation, nothing stunted or wedged. 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, 2005, 216). Her faith paves the way for her reconciliation but she still suffers from her traumatic experience that is intensified by her love relationship with Tamer (her employer's younger brother).

Najwa's relationship with Tamer hinders her healing process. She is attracted to his Islamic piety and youthfulness; however, the age gap and social difference between them are a thorny matter. The refusal of Tamer's family brings back all the disappointments Najwa has endured; yet this time she has her faith to rely on. She accepts to take the money offered by Tamer's mother to go on pilgrimage. The prospect of a rebirth through pilgrimage compensates Najwa's failure to get married and have a stable life. Nonetheless, it rekindles her traumatic experience of loneliness and rejection. Aboulela ends the novel with Najwa's recurrent dream about being ill in her parents' room back in Sudan which clarifies the lasting effects of trauma and PTSD.

As Najwa falls asleep, her thoughts drift and she subconsciously feels that taking the money means that she has not really loved Tamer. This stream of thought introduces her illness and her recurrent dream of being ill and in need of her parents' room and attention. She ends her narrative saying:

Around us, beyond the bed, the room is dark and cluttered, all the *possessions that distinguish us in ruins*. I am *not surprised*. It is a *natural decay* and I *accept it*. Carpets threadbare and curtains torn. Valuables squashed and stamped with filth. Things that must not be seen, *shameful things*, are *exposed*. The *ceiling has caved in*, the door is *gutted* and the *crumbling walls* are smeared with *guilt*. (Aboulela, 2005, 276 [emphasis added]).

The dream reinforces the ambivalence of the novel's ending; Najwa seems to waver between her need for security and her acceptance of trauma. First, she is safe in bed while everything around her is falling apart; yet she feels that it is the "natural decay". The metaphor invokes images of chaos and ruin, exactly like what the coup has done to her house and life. She feels that the caving in of the ceiling is what makes it low as she mentions at the beginning of the novel; thus, she cannot escape her destiny or the feelings of guilt.

Najwa's dream relates to what Ogaga Ifowodo describes as the death of the postcolonial subject (2013, xvi). Her individual trauma as a political refugee, as well as her collective trauma of being a Muslim in the West, are both the result of colonialism. Even if her newfound Muslim identity helps in the healing process, the trauma of being a postcolonial subject still haunts her. The ambivalent ending highlights the absent role of the West in elevating the traumas of immigrants. Aboulela and Faqir share the same viewpoint regarding the traumatic ending of colonial subjects which is again highlighted in *My Name is Salma's* ending.

Salma at the end of the novel is completely lost; unfortunately, she does not find an anchor like Najwa because the former is too attached to her past that haunts and destroys her. The vicious circle Salma lives in is the result of multiple traumas and PTSD. She cannot let go of her past for she always feels like a fish out of water; she subconsciously keeps her Muslim identity. She refuses to drink alcohol and lies about it. She marries John, an atheist, who becomes a "nominal" Muslim (Faqir, 2007, 290). His decision to convert is based on his readings not upon her request; nevertheless, it shows that he understands how her Muslim identity plays a crucial part in her identity reformation. However, she feels that she is "Not capable of love. Too tired," and is haunted by "too much past" (ibid., 291). Eventually, Salma gives birth to a baby boy named Imran; yet she never forgets and says, "I should have been happy, but something was holding my heart back" (ibid., 308).

Salma's traumatic past and PTSD make her continuously suffer from nightmares and hallucinations of her daughter calling her. Her fragmentary status compels her to consider going back; she asks herself, "How could I ignore Layla's cries, her calls, her constant pleading? I stood in the kitchen, a woman with twisted neck looking both ways: backwards and forwards" (Faqr, 2007, 313). Her psychological state deteriorates completely as she says, "I began seeing her swollen face everywhere, on window panes, in my breakfast bowl swimming in the milk, in the water whirling down the drain of the kitchen sink, in all the mirrors. I began hearing her muffled cries whenever a breeze hit my face" (ibid., 315).

Salma's husband tries to argue with her but her deterioration is beyond repair. "You are letting this nightmare destroy our life. You have a chance of happiness and what do you do? You throw it away.... Please hold on to Imran and let go of Layla" (Faqr, 2007, 321-2). Eventually, she leaves her husband, John, and their baby son to go back to her daughter Layla. By the time she arrives, Layla had already been killed. Salma visits her grave and her psychological deterioration makes her hallucinate about seeing her daughter along with her husband John and their son Imran among the black irises in the graveyard. Finally, Salma's brother kills her; as she narrates, "When I turned my head I felt a cold pain pierce through my forehead, there between my eyes, and then like blood in water it spread out" (ibid., 327). The description of the pain like water brings forth the water metaphor with which the novel opens.

The tragic ending of the novel terminates the traumas of Salma's life; as Dallel Sarnou rightly points out, "Undertaking a brutal process of acculturation, Salma's identity is changeable to the point of fragmentation" (2014, 57). Furthermore, Ron Eyerman states that, "Individual and collective trauma may also be thought of as reinforcing one another, making the shock and sense of loss even greater" (2013, 43). Salma's individual trauma makes her lose her Bedouin Muslim identity by trying to assimilate unconditionally into the English subject Sally; however, she does not fit in and she is not accepted in her new acquired

identity which leads to her psychological and physical destruction as part of the collective trauma of Muslims in the West.

Unlike Najwa, Salma does not find solace in religion which is “weak as the tea in this country,” as she clearly states in her narrative (Faqir, 2007, 44). The comparison between religion and tea reflects the way Salma sees religion as part of the culture rather than faith. Furthermore, she sees religion as “difficult”; as Esra Santesso further explains that Salma’s struggle with religion is due to the fact that it represents home and at the same time the reason behind her exile (2013, 114). She states that, “What she [Faqir] is interested in is showing how fundamental differences between the cultures push the immigrant towards disorientation” (ibid.).

In light of what has been argued, *Minaret and My Name is Salma* represent the postcolonial traumas of their protagonists. They delineate individual traumas and their effect on collective identity. As Irene Visser points out, “Trauma, then, is a very complex phenomenon. It is not only to be understood as acute and event-based, but can also be chronic and non-event based; it can be debilitating and disruptive to individuals and communities, but it can also create a stronger social cohesion and a renewed sense of identity” (2014, 109-110). Leila Aboulela and Fadia Faqir in this sense seek to create trauma narratives that hold a mirror to both cultures in order to interrogate their oppressive cultural discourses.

## **Notes :**

- 1) Miram AbuDaqqa argues that Faqir’s representation of the Arab world is paradoxical as it concurs with the Western colonial discourse through its depiction of the Christian White saviour (2015, 70).
- 2) see also Vickroy, 2002, 13; Herman, 1992, 45

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