

Prayer, Power, and Patriarchy: Reinterpreting Faith in Leila Aboulela's

Minaret

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Abstract

Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* offers a gripping examination of the intersection of faith, gender, and societal expectations, presenting a multifaceted narrative that lends itself to a study of Islamic feminism. This paper, titled "Prayer, Power, and Patriarchy: Reinterpreting Faith in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*," examines the protagonist Najwa's journey through the lens of reinterpretation of religious texts, analysing how Islamic principles, when viewed through a feminist perspective, serve as a source of empowerment rather than subjugation. The paper begins by situating Najwa's transformation from a privileged Sudanese woman to a marginalized domestic worker within the broader context of patriarchal structures that are often perpetuated through rigid interpretations of Islam. It investigates how Najwa's reconnection with her faith allows her to reclaim agency in a world that seeks to silence and diminish her. This study also critiques the societal imposition of patriarchal norms under the guise of religious obligation. Furthermore, the paper delves into the power dynamics in Najwa's relationships, highlighting how her faith equips her to navigate complex social and personal challenges. Through a close reading of *Minaret*, this paper argues that Aboulela's portrayal of Najwa disrupts stereotypes of Muslim women as oppressed by religion, instead presenting a narrative where faith becomes a tool for self-empowerment and resistance against patriarchal oppression. In doing so, the novel contributes significantly to the discourse on Islamic feminism, offering insights into the potential of reinterpreted faith to foster gender equality within religious frameworks.

Keywords: Islam, Feminism, Patriarchy, Power, Gender.

INTRODUCTION

The intersection of religion and gender has long been a topic of critical discussion, with Islamic feminism emerging as a vital framework to address the interplay between faith and women's empowerment. Islamic feminism challenges patriarchal interpretations of religious texts, advocating for egalitarian principles

inherent in Islam while promoting women's rights and agency. In literary contexts, this approach offers valuable insights into narratives that explore the lived experiences of Muslim women, particularly in relation to their faith and societal roles. Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* is a poignant example of such a narrative, searching into themes of prayer, power,

and patriarchy as it chronicles the journey of Najwa, a young Sudanese woman navigating loss, faith, and self-discovery. Aboulela is a Sudanese-British author known for her works that explore themes of identity, faith, migration, and cultural intersectionality. Born in Cairo to Sudanese parents in 1964, Aboulela moved to the UK in the 1990s, where she later became an acclaimed writer. Her novels often delve into the lives of Muslim women, portraying their experiences of living between different cultures and navigating complex personal and spiritual journeys. Some of her notable works include *The Translator* (1999), *Minaret* (2006), and *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015). Aboulela's writing is recognized for its nuanced portrayal of faith, spirituality, and the challenges faced by individuals in post-colonial contexts. Her works have been praised for their emotional depth, intellectual rigor, and exploration of the intersection between religion and modernity.

Aboulela's *Minaret* provides a fertile ground for exploring the role of reinterpreted religious texts in reshaping women's identities and challenging patriarchal norms. The protagonist, Najwa, undergoes a profound transformation, moving from a life of privilege and secularism to one of marginalization and

spiritual introspection. Her journey reflects the struggles of many Muslim women who seek solace and strength in their faith while resisting societal pressures rooted in patriarchal traditions. Najwa's reconnection with Islamic practices, such as prayer and veiling, serves as a counter-narrative to stereotypes that portray Muslim women as passive victims of their religion. Instead, Aboulela's portrayal underscores the empowering potential of faith when divorced from rigid, patriarchal interpretations.

Islamic feminism is a complex framework that bridges feminist ideals with Islamic theology, challenging patriarchal norms often justified by traditional interpretations of religious texts. It emphasizes the Quran's egalitarian ethos and advocates for the re-evaluation of religious texts to reclaim women's agency. As a literary theory, Islamic feminism examines narratives that engage with themes of gender and religion, focusing on how women's experiences are shaped by faith and societal constructs. Central to Islamic feminism is the principle of *ijtihad*, or independent reasoning, which encourages the contextual reinterpretation of sacred texts. This principle challenges androcentric readings that have historically marginalized women, seeking instead to uncover the Quran's universal principles of

justice and equality. By emphasizing ethical teachings over literalist interpretations, Islamic feminism paves the way for a more inclusive understanding of Islam.

Two prominent theorists, Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas, have significantly shaped this discourse. Amina Wadud's seminal work, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*, foregrounds women's experiences in interpreting the Quran. Wadud critiques patriarchal exegeses and argues that the Quran's core message is one of justice and equality. She calls for a hermeneutical approach that prioritizes the ethical and spiritual dimensions of the text, rather than rigid, patriarchal readings. Similarly, Asma Barlas, in her book *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*, challenges the institutionalization of patriarchy within Islamic thought. Barlas distinguishes between divine intent and human interpretations, advocating for a reading of the Quran that liberates it from gender biases. She highlights the Quran's affirmation of spiritual and moral equality between men and women, arguing that patriarchal readings often reflect cultural prejudices rather than the text's actual teachings.

In literature, these theoretical perspectives illuminate how characters navigate the intersection of faith and gender. Islamic feminism as a literary lens examines how protagonists engage with and reinterpret religious practices to assert their agency. This approach is particularly relevant to novels like Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*, where the protagonist Najwa reclaims her faith as a source of empowerment. Najwa's spiritual journey, characterized by her reconnection with prayer and veiling, reflects the potential of faith to challenge patriarchal norms when divorced from oppressive interpretations. By applying Islamic feminism, readers and critics can explore how literature critiques patriarchal structures while celebrating the transformative power of reinterpreted religious texts. This perspective not only broadens the understanding of gender dynamics within Islamic contexts but also reaffirms the Quran's capacity to inspire justice and equality in contemporary discourse.

Islamic feminism and secular feminism share the common goal of advocating for women's rights, but they differ in their approach and underlying philosophical frameworks. Islamic feminism is rooted in Islamic principles, emphasizing the re-interpretation of Islamic texts and traditions from a feminist perspective.

Secular feminism, on the other hand, is grounded in a more universal and secular approach, often seeking to challenge patriarchy and gender inequality without the need for religious justification. Islamic feminists argue that Islam, when interpreted correctly, inherently supports women's rights, while secular feminists might challenge religious doctrines themselves. Islamic feminism draws its inspiration from the Qur'an, Hadith (sayings of Prophet Muhammad), and Islamic jurisprudence. Islamic feminists argue that true Islamic principles provide for equality between men and women, but patriarchal interpretations of religious texts have historically distorted this message. They focus on reclaiming a more gender-egalitarian interpretation of Islam. They focus on reinterpretation or "ijtihad" (independent legal reasoning) of sacred texts. They challenge traditional interpretations that reinforce gender hierarchies and present alternative readings of key verses to show that Islam can be liberating for women. They incorporate a spiritual dimension. It sees the empowerment of women as part of a religious mandate and a way to strengthen faith and spirituality within an Islamic context. Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2006) is a novel that explores themes of faith, identity, and the complex intersection of

religion, culture, and gender. The protagonist, Najwa, a young Sudanese woman, undergoes a personal and spiritual journey as she grapples with the challenges of a post-revolutionary life in London.

Amina Wadud is one of the leading scholars in the field of Islamic feminism. She advocates for gender equality within Islam by challenging patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'an. Wadud's most influential work, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (1999), argues that the Qur'an, when interpreted in its historical context, is inherently egalitarian and supports the empowerment of women. Her central thesis is that traditional readings of the Qur'an have been influenced by male-dominated interpretations, often obscuring the text's true message regarding women's roles. She calls for a re-examination of the text with a focus on justice, equality, and inclusivity. She states, "The Qur'an can be seen as a liberating force for women, and we need to apply feminist methodologies to unearth that liberating potential" (*Qur'an and Woman*, p. 9). Wadud challenges the idea that women's inferiority is mandated by the Qur'an. She highlights that the verses often cited to justify women's subordination are based on historical context and social norms of the time, which do not necessarily apply to

modern society. Her approach to *ijtihad* (independent legal reasoning) is also crucial. She argues that women must be involved in the process of interpreting Islamic texts, saying, "We cannot understand the Qur'an or its message without interpreting it through our own experience as women" (*Qur'an and Woman*, p. 33). This perspective of Wadud is vividly portrayed in the novel *Minaret*. In the novel, the central character is Najwa whose journey reflects the tension between the traditional roles women are expected to play in her society and her own desire for spiritual and personal empowerment. Najwa's embrace of Islam in London represents a re-engagement with her faith, but one that is free from the patriarchal constraints that dominated her life in Sudan. Her decision to wear the hijab in London, for example, can be seen as an act of reclaiming her agency and spirituality, rather than adhering to an oppressive tradition. The novel's portrayal of Najwa's spiritual awakening echoes Wadud's idea of "re-reading" the Qur'an. While Najwa initially associates religion with the oppressive forces in her life, her deeper exploration of Islam in the British context leads to a more personal and liberated understanding of the faith. This shift reflects the feminist interpretation that the Qur'an itself is a source of empowerment

for women, but that traditional interpretations have often obscured this potential. Najwa's understanding of the Qur'an evolves throughout the novel, as she moves beyond her initial frustrations with religion and develops a relationship with Islam that is deeply personal and empowering. Her spiritual awakening in London mirrors Wadud's belief that feminist methodologies can reveal a liberating potential in religious texts that have long been used to justify gender subordination.

Asma Barlas is another prominent scholar in the field of Islamic feminism. Like Amina Wadud, Barlas challenges patriarchal interpretations of Islamic texts and advocates for a re-reading of the Qur'an that emphasizes gender equality. Her work, particularly her seminal text *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (2002), is foundational in the Islamic feminist movement. Barlas' contributions focus on the role of interpretation and the ways in which patriarchal structures have shaped the understanding of Islamic texts, especially the Qur'an. One of Barlas' central arguments is that patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'an are not inherent to the text itself but are the result of historical and cultural influences. She proposes the idea of "unreading" these

interpretations—challenging the established readings of the Qur'an that have been used to justify patriarchy. By critically examining how the Qur'an has been interpreted through the lens of patriarchy, Barlas suggests that gender equality is an inherent value within the Islamic tradition, which has been obscured by centuries of male-dominated scholarship. She explains, "The Qur'an, in its original form, does not endorse patriarchy, and there is no authentic basis for the subordination of women in it. What is patriarchal about interpretations of the Qur'an is a product of history, not divinity." (*Believing Women in Islam*, p. 6). She argues that patriarchal interpretations often rely on selective readings of the Qur'an, interpreting verses out of context and ignoring the overall egalitarian message of the text. In this way, the Qur'an has been distorted to support male dominance, whereas Barlas believes that a true reading of the Qur'an reveals a call for gender justice and equality. A significant part of Barlas' argument is that the Qur'an, when interpreted in its proper historical and social context, promotes the inherent equality of men and women. She criticizes the view that the Qur'an treats men as superior to women, asserting that this is a misinterpretation of the text. She highlights that the Qur'an emphasizes

equality in creation and value between men and women. For instance, one of the key verses that Islamic feminists like Barlas refer to is Qur'an 33:35, which speaks of both men and women as equal in their capacity for righteousness:

"Indeed, the Muslim men and Muslim women, the believing men and believing women, the obedient men and obedient women, the truthful men and truthful women, the patient men and patient women, the humble men and humble women, the charitable men and charitable women, the fasting men and fasting women, the men who guard their private parts and the women who do so..." (Qur'an, 33:35).

According to Barlas, such verses clearly support gender equality, as they emphasize shared moral and spiritual responsibilities for both men and women. She contends that the problem lies not in the Qur'an itself, but in the ways that patriarchal interpretations have dominated Islamic discourse. Barlas' approach to Islamic feminism is both critical and transformative. She advocates for a feminism that is rooted in Islamic principles, rather than one that is imported from Western traditions. She challenges the assumption that feminism is a foreign concept incompatible with Islam, arguing instead that Islam has a rich tradition of

gender equality that has been suppressed by patriarchal interpretations. She writes, "Islamic feminism is not about importing a set of Western ideals into the Muslim world, but about retrieving the values of justice and equality inherent in the Qur'an and the prophetic tradition" (*Believing Women in Islam*, p. 9). This approach places the focus on the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, suggesting that true Islamic values inherently align with feminist principles of justice, equality, and the empowerment of women. In "*Believing Women in Islam*", Barlas emphasizes the importance of understanding gender justice within the Islamic framework. She contends that the Qur'an offers a moral and ethical vision that includes both men and women as equal participants in the moral order of the world. Women's roles are not merely confined to the private sphere or restricted to subordination, but they are encouraged to contribute to society at large. She addresses issues like marriage, inheritance, and women's legal rights in Islamic law. Barlas argues that traditional interpretations of these issues have been shaped by patriarchal cultures and not by the Qur'an itself. For example, in the case of inheritance, while the Qur'an does specify different shares for men and women, Barlas believes that the broader

ethical principles of justice and equality are more important than specific legal rulings that have often been misinterpreted. She elucidates, "The Qur'an gives both women and men a right to their labour, their wealth, and their person, and it requires that men treat women with respect and equity, especially in marriage" (*Believing Women in Islam*, p. 53). Barlas critiques the way patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'an have been entrenched in Islamic scholarship and practice. She focuses on the role of male scholars and interpreters who have shaped Islamic law (fiqh) and theology, often in ways that marginalize women's rights and contributions. This patriarchal framework, according to Barlas, is a social construct rather than a reflection of the true Islamic teachings. Barlas writes, "Patriarchy is not an inherent feature of Islam, but a historical product of social and political forces that have shaped interpretations of the Qur'an" (*Believing Women in Islam*, p. 72). One of Barlas' central concerns is the agency of women. She emphasizes that women are not passive recipients of divine law, but active agents who can interpret and engage with Islamic texts. For Barlas, the empowerment of women lies in their ability to reclaim the Qur'an as a text that supports their rights and dignity. She argues: "Women's empowerment is not

about becoming like men, but about having the right to define their own place in the world, according to the principles of equality, justice, and dignity that the Qur'an embodies" (*Believing Women in Islam*, p. 113).

In *Minaret*, Najwa's life and spiritual journey exemplify the process of "unreading" patriarchy. She is deeply affected by her experiences in Sudan, where traditional gender roles were enforced and women's voices were silenced. In London, however, Najwa is able to reframe her relationship with Islam and her place within it. Through her encounters with other Muslim women who live their faith in ways that challenge patriarchal norms, Najwa begins to see that her own agency and empowerment are not at odds with her religion. Najwa's decision to wear the hijab, for instance, is portrayed not as an act of submission to patriarchy but as a reclaiming of her identity and faith. This act of wearing the veil in the context of a free society allows Najwa to "unread" the patriarchal interpretation of the veil as a symbol of subjugation. Instead, she finds it to be a personal choice that aligns with her desire for spiritual authenticity and freedom. This aligns with Barlas' argument that patriarchal interpretations of religious symbols like the veil are products of social and

historical circumstances, rather than inherent aspects of the religion itself.

Further, Barlas' emphasis on women's active participation in the interpretation of religious texts finds a parallel in Najwa's developing understanding of Islam. As Najwa explores her faith more deeply, she is able to challenge the patriarchal influences on her previous understanding of religion. This shift represents a feminist reclaiming of Islam, where Najwa can view her religious practice as a form of empowerment rather than oppression. Both Wadud and Barlas stress the importance of gender justice and the agency of women within the Islamic framework. For Wadud, gender justice is at the heart of the Qur'an's message, and women's agency is key to understanding their true role in Islamic society. Barlas, similarly, underscores the idea that the Qur'an gives both men and women equal rights to their labour, wealth, and dignity, and that women should not be seen as passive recipients of divine law but as active agents in interpreting and living their faith. Najwa's journey in *Minaret* exemplifies the importance of reclaiming one's agency within an Islamic context. Initially, she experiences a sense of powerlessness, first in her father's household and later in the political upheaval of Sudan. However, through her personal connection to faith and her

relationships with other women who practice Islam in ways that empower them, Najwa begins to assert her own agency.

For example, Najwa's decision to return to school and her choice to work at a mosque, despite the challenges posed by her personal and societal circumstances, illustrate her growing sense of self-empowerment. These decisions reflect the broader theme of Islamic feminism, where women's agency is not defined by their adherence to patriarchal structures but by their ability to engage with and reinterpret their faith in a way that aligns with their personal sense of justice and equality. In her work at the mosque, Najwa is able to connect with other Muslim women who, like her, are navigating the intersection of faith, gender, and cultural identity. Through these relationships, Najwa learns that Islamic values of justice and equality can be a source of strength, rather than oppression. Her eventual reconciliation with her faith highlights Barlas' and Wadud's belief that Islam, when interpreted through a feminist lens, offers a framework for both personal and collective liberation.

Initially, Najwa's understanding of Islam is shaped by her privileged, secular upbringing in Sudan. Religion is distant and largely ceremonial in her early life, reflecting a cultural, rather than personal,

relationship with faith. After the political upheaval in Sudan and her family's fall from grace, Najwa relocates to London, where she experiences a profound shift in her identity. Stripped of her social privilege, Najwa turns to Islam for solace and guidance, embracing practices such as wearing the hijab and engaging in prayer. Her decision to adopt these practices in a Western, secular context reflects her agency and personal choice rather than societal pressure. "Wearing the hijab was my gesture of defiance, my rejection of the secular world that had failed me." (*Minaret*, Chapter 15) Najwa's choice to wear the hijab in London is particularly significant. In Sudan, the hijab was not part of her life, but in London, it becomes a symbol of her faith and individuality. This act aligns with Amina Wadud's notion that Islamic practices, when chosen freely, can be empowering and reflective of a woman's agency. Najwa's hijab is not imposed by external forces but emerges from her spiritual conviction, subverting Western stereotypes of the veil as inherently oppressive.

Through Najwa's journey, *Minaret* critiques patriarchal interpretations of Islam that have often confined women to subordinate roles. Najwa's embrace of Islam is not an acceptance of patriarchal structures but a rejection of the cultural

and social injustices she has experienced. Her relationship with Tamer, the younger brother of her employer, illustrates this tension. Tamer admires Najwa's piety and sees her as a model of an ideal Muslim woman, but his views are rooted in a romanticized and patriarchal understanding of gender roles in Islam. Najwa recognizes the complexity of their situation, including the social and cultural barriers that make a relationship between them unfeasible. Her rejection of Tamer's idealization reflects her understanding of Islam as a religion of equality and justice, rather than a tool for reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies. For example, in one scene Tamer expresses his desire for Najwa to marry him because he believes her religious devotion will help him become a better Muslim. Najwa resists this notion, recognizing that her faith journey is personal and cannot serve as a foundation for Tamer's self-improvement. This interaction highlights the tension between patriarchal expectations and Najwa's evolving sense of agency. "Tamer wanted me to be his salvation. But I wasn't going to be a symbol for him. I had found my own path, and it was mine alone." (*Minaret*, Chapter 19)

Najwa's migration from Sudan to London represents a broader narrative of dislocation and loss. In this context, Islam

becomes a stabilizing force for Najwa, offering her a sense of identity and belonging in an alien environment. Her spiritual transformation allows her to navigate the challenges of diaspora life, including racism, class disparity, and cultural alienation. Najwa's work as a domestic helper contrast starkly with her privileged life in Sudan. Despite the humiliation and isolation, she feels, her growing connection to Islam provides her with a sense of dignity and purpose. The mosque becomes a community space where Najwa can rebuild her identity, interact with other Muslim women, and find solidarity. "In Sudan, I had been the daughter of someone important. In London, I was no one, a brown-skinned woman cleaning the kitchens of the rich." (*Minaret*, Chapter 9) This theme ties into Wadud's emphasis on the Qur'an's egalitarian ethos. For Najwa, Islam becomes a refuge that transcends the material and cultural boundaries imposed by her circumstances. Her faith allows her to construct a new narrative of selfhood that resists the alienation of her migrant experience.

Minaret also examines how the intersection of gender, faith, and class shapes Najwa's experiences. After losing her family's wealth and status, Najwa finds herself at the bottom of the social

hierarchy in London. Her gender and class position make her particularly vulnerable, but her faith becomes a source of strength and resistance against these structural inequalities. Najwa's relationships with her employers highlight the power dynamics of class and race. She is often treated with condescension or invisibility, but her adherence to Islamic practices, such as daily prayer, becomes a quiet act of defiance. Her faith gives her a sense of inner worth that counterbalances the external devaluation she faces. "The mosque became my sanctuary, a place where I was no longer a stranger. It was a refuge from the loneliness of the world outside." (*Minaret*, Chapter 12) Barlas' critique of patriarchal and hierarchical structures within Islamic societies is relevant here. While Najwa experiences these injustices, she also finds that Islam, properly understood, provides her with a framework for justice and equality that transcends her societal position. Najwa's transformation is not solely an individual journey; it is also shaped by her interactions with other Muslim women in London. The mosque becomes a space where Najwa forms meaningful connections, learns from others, and finds a community that supports her spiritual and emotional growth. This communal aspect of faith reinforces the idea that

Islam can foster solidarity and empowerment among women. Najwa's friendships with other women at the mosque, such as her employer's mother, illustrate the diverse ways in which Muslim women navigate their faith. These relationships allow Najwa to see Islam as a living, dynamic tradition that accommodates a variety of experiences and perspectives.

Thus, Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* offers a profound exploration of faith, identity, and agency within the context of migration and gendered struggles. Through Najwa's journey, the novel illustrates how Islam, when reclaimed through a personal and egalitarian lens, serves as a source of empowerment rather than subjugation. Drawing on the feminist reinterpretations of Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas, the text challenges patriarchal readings of religion and highlights the liberating potential of faith for women navigating complex socio-cultural realities. Najwa's experiences underscore the intersections of gender, class, and migration, revealing how faith can act as a counter-narrative to dislocation and alienation. Ultimately, *Minaret* positions Islam not as a constraint but as a dynamic and inclusive framework for justice, identity, and spiritual resilience.

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