

Offering Guidance for Arab Women in the West in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* and *Bird Summons*

Mais M. Salah¹, & Nasaybah W. Awajan²

¹ Middle East University, Amman, Jordan

² Assistant Professor, Middle East University, Amman, Jordan

Correspondence: Nasaybah W. Awajan, Assistant Professor, Middle East University, Amman, Jordan. E-mail: nawajan@meu.edu.jo

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Abstract

The current study explores Leila Aboulela's literary representations of the problems faced by Arab women living in the West, and how they overcome them in her novels *Minaret* and *Bird Summons*. Both novels are analyzed through the lens of postcolonialism, and especially through the views of Edward Said. The contribution of the current study lies in the fact that limited studies have been conducted on *Bird Summons* since it is considered a new literary work. Moreover, previous studies tackle each literary work independently, whereas the current research tackles both novels together. Furthermore, Aboulela's *Minaret* has been the subject of many studies, but little research has been done on how she embodies the challenges that Arab women living in the West encounter.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Orientalism, Minaret, Bird Summons, Said, Bhabha

1. Introduction

Arabs living in the West often face obstacles related to the stereotypes about them. Unfortunately, the assumed differences between the East and the West have played a vital role in shaping and spreading these negative stereotypes. These images only increased after the 9/11 attacks with Western views changing from Arabs being backward, uncivilized savages to Arabs being seen as violent terrorists. According to Harb (2012), the aftermath of 9/11 had a huge impact on how the West viewed the East. Vilarrubias (2016) agrees that, after 9/11, Arabs in general were described as terrorists and enemies. Finally, Arab writers had enough of these false representations and began to write back against them. Said (1978) defines stereotyping as the process of enforcing and framing a false image on a particular group of people. He adds that the "Orient" - a term used to refer to the East - is a European creation which carries all of the typical Eastern stereotypes. "Orientals" (which include Arabs) are seen as exotic, barbaric, backwards and deprived of the real essence of their existence. These misrepresentations emerged due to the huge gap between the two cultures. Said (1978) states that the whole idea behind creating distinctions between the East and the West is to pave the way for the concept of superiority. Pickering (2015) states that stereotyping is the process of evaluating and representing others. It targets certain people and demeans or confines them. In other words, it paints the Orient as weak and the Occident as strong, thereby making the West more capable of liberating and dominating.

According to Said (1978), the West created images of Arabs before even knowing or meeting them and these stereotypes about Arabs in general, and Arab women in particular, vary. Hansson and Henriksson (2013) state that women in the East are presented as victims of their families. They are seen as passive, obedient, weak figures and therefore need the support of males in their lives. Mishra (2007) states that some Western media portrays Arab women as weak characters who need the West to help grant them their rights and freedom. Nevertheless, it is because of these stereotypes that Arabs living in the West face all sorts of obstacles that are often difficult to overcome including discrimination, Islamophobia, unemployment, and raising children in non-Muslim communities.

Accordingly, diasporic writers decided to use their words to push back against this prejudice, and help Arabs survive and fit in the West. Santesso and McClung (2019) argue that the main reason behind the appearance of different narratives after 9/11 was to address the misrepresentations of Arabs, and Muslims including those that increased even more after the attacks. Indeed, diasporic Arab women writers aim not only to represent Arab women, and their struggle in the West through their writings, but they also aim to pass along their experiences in the West. Furthermore, diasporic Arab writers also attempt to use their works to educate Westerners about the East by addressing the Arab stereotypes, and by portraying an image that uncovers the reality of the East that refutes these negative images. Abdul Majid (2015) states that many Arab writers resorted to writing as an attempt to address, and negate the stereotypes that aim to tarnish the view of Arabs.

One of these diasporic Arab writers, who try to present some of the issues that Arab women suffer from in the West is Leila Aboulela. According to Chambers (2009), Aboulela is a Sudanese writer who was born in Cairo in 1962 to an Egyptian mother, but grew up in Sudan/Khartoum. She currently lives in Aberdeen, Scotland which gives her a keen sense on living as an Arab woman in both the East and the West. Indeed, Ancellin (2009) states that Aboulela tends to address and respond to different misrepresentations that target Muslims in the West, especially females, in her novels. She also tries to show how these women are able to overcome these obstacles.

Furthermore, Al-Asmakh (2009) states that Aboulela succeeded in attract the world's attention towards her writing by bringing the East, and the West, together and represent both the struggles, and the unusual situations which Arab women face.

As a result, the current study explores Leila Aboulela's literary representations of the issues and extraordinary circumstances that Arab women face in the West in her novels *Minaret* (2005) and *Bird Summons* (2019). The study also examines the ways Aboulela presents of how these Arab women overcome the issues and challenges they are exposed to in the West. Since *Bird Summons* is a relatively new novel, few studies and reviews have been conducted on this work, such as the studies of Arkhagha & Amrieh's (2021), Aladylah (2023), and Awajan (2023), and the reviews of Viswanathan and DeZelar-Tiedman.

Unlike *Bird Summons*, however, Aboulela's *Minaret* has been the subject of many studies, but little research has been done on how she embodies the challenges that Arab women encounter. The researcher approaches *Bird Summons* and *Minaret* from the lens of postcolonialism, specially applying Edward Said's ideas on Orientalism and his views on the Orient (East) and Occident (West). The contribution of the current study lies in the fact that limited studies have been conducted on the more recently published novel, *Bird Summons* (2019). Moreover, previous studies tackle each literary work independently, whereas the current research tackles both novels together.

2. Literature Review

Many authors write about the struggle that Najwa, the main character in *Minaret*, encounters in the West and how these issues help her to become stronger. Al-Karawi and Bahar (2014) state that Najwa faces several seemingly insuperable obstacles throughout the novel. The first obstacle is her father's fate when he is taken during a coup, tried and found guilty of corruption, and summarily executed. What Aboulela might be willing to suggest is that women should not surrender to the faults of their parents or anyone else. Furthermore, Aboulela wants women to learn how to overcome harsh situations that they are exposed to. Rouabhia and Melaikia (2019) state that the Najwa faces a constant struggle regarding identity and alienation, in addition to her sense of loneliness after losing her family. They argue that there is no one to support Najwa. Fittingly, she takes on the responsibility of constructing a unique identity and improving herself after all she has experienced. Here, Aboulela wants to clarify that sometimes women learn lessons after undergoing such troublesome experiences. However, these lessons make them stronger and more mature. Awajan and Al-Shetawi (2021) state that when Najwa travels to the West, she indulges in every kind of freedom and stays far away from religion or any limitations. Still, she is unable to feel content. They add that Najwa chooses a liberal life, not understanding that she is making mistakes until committing adultery with Anwar. In other words, Najwa learns later that the ultimate freedom does not bring her any salvation. They also argue that, at the beginning of the novel, Najwa is presented as an Arab woman who is lost in the West with no ties or support. However, she discovers that Islam can help guide her in the West and is, therefore, able to make friends and create her own community in the West. They add that this serves to make Najwa stronger and helps her understand herself better. Ironically, she practices Islam, a religion that the West views as oppressive towards women, to gain her freedom.

As mentioned before, very few studies have been conducted on Leila Aboulela's *Bird Summons*. One of those few is a study done by Arkhagha and Abu Amrieh (2021) who discuss magical realism, faith, and identity in Aboulela's novel. They posit that some of the issues Arab women face when living in the West are much like those issues she encountered herself as a Sudanese woman who moved to Scotland. They argue that by using, "Muslim logic" in her writing, she guides other women on how to make decisions in the West. This is evident in her both her narratives and in presenting the way her characters act in the West. Additionally, all three women - Salma, Moni, and Iman- first made their journeys in order to educate themselves and learn the history of Islam. This can serve as a reminder for Arab women about the importance of learning more about Islam and following in the footsteps of previous Muslim women who have made a difference. According to Englund (2020), one of the major conflicts and obstacles that most of Aboulela's characters suffer from is the feeling of being an "other". In other words, because they are foreigners, they feel that they will never be able to fit in with Western society. Englund adds that Salma in *Bird Summons* worries about being the "other" even within her family. However, through her writings, Leila Aboulela wants to teach Arab women how to overcome the idea of "otherness" and live like any other normal citizen of their new country. According to Christine Dezelar-Tiedman's review (2020) of *Bird Summons* in the Library Journal, the three main characters are suffering from personal crises. She adds that each woman is facing their own problems, and due to their differences, they start to quarrel later in the novel. However, by the novel's end, Aboulela adds some unusual occurrences that force the three women to confront their problems and choose their own track.

In Zipp's Christian Science Monitor review (2020) of the novel, she believes that the obstacles that the three women face appeared at the beginning of the novel when Iman's third husband left her while not being able to rejoin her family in Syria. She adds that the reader is then introduced to Salma's problem. She is married to a Scottish man and has Scottish children who, Salma believes, look down on her. As a result, Salma develops nostalgia for Egypt and starts texting an old friend there. Zipp (2020) also adds that the major issues that Moni faces is her disabled son and her demanding husband. Al-Asmakh (2019) notes that the journey Aboulela describes is one that ends up being a spiritual journey that makes the women stronger. Furthermore, it teaches them how to embrace their religion and improve themselves.

Aladylah (2023) explores the problem of narratives of dislocation in diaspora in Aboulela's *Bird Summons* (2019) and how these narratives effect "transformation and self-discovery" (p. 209). He states that the three female characters "have finally eloped from an elusive matrix of inside and outside, being and becoming, social dissonance, and ambiguities of identity" (p. 209). In resemblance,

Awajan (2023) explores how Aboulela presents metamorphosis and how the three female characters reconstruct their identities as Arabs living in the West through metamorphosis. According to Awajan (2023), at this stage, these three female characters reach to what Bhabha calls the “Third Space”.

3. Analysis

Minaret can be described as a novel that allows the reader to explore life in two different parts of the world, Sudan and Britain, by tracking the journey of the main character, Najwa, following her father’s imprisonment. Najwa’s father was a government official in Sudan who, after a coup swept over the country, was accused of corruption and arrested. Consequently, Najwa and her family were forced into exile and quickly fled Sudan for Great Britain. Throughout the novel, Aboulela shows how an Arab woman can overcome the challenges of living the West. One of the first issues she introduces in *Minaret* is the feeling of nostalgia that comes with moving abroad and comparing the then and now. Najwa’s move from Sudan to Britain is transitional period for her and one that she was unprepared for. First, Britain is very different from Sudan in terms of culture, language, and inhabitants. Additionally, her lifestyle changes, too. In Sudan she lived luxuriously. In Britain, she lives as one in exile. The huge gap between Najwa’s past and present allows the reader to witness and understand firsthand the mental challenges that Najwa is going through. Murshed & Abdulqader (2020) state that the interaction between home and the host country creates a sort of negative effect and influences the mentality of immigrants. Such is the case with Najwa.

According to Al-Samakh (2019), Najwa and her identity are torn between the past and the present. Najwa cannot comprehend all the changes that happened in her life and is unable to forget her past and adapt to her present. Thus, she creates yet another obstacle that prevents her from fitting into the West. Shortly after moving to Britain, Najwa’s father is found guilty is subsequently executed. It is then that Najwa’s life takes a turn for the worst as the family realizes that they are on their own in the West and without support. To make things worse, her mother falls ill and dies, and her brother, Omar, is imprisoned leaving Najwa to suffer alone. When Najwa realizes how hard life is without her parents, she utters, “Did they know that I was flattened and small without them?” (Aboulela 2005, p.144). Although distraught, Najwa is able to support her mother throughout her illness and remains by her side until her mother passes away. She also supports her brother despite believing, as Awajan and Al-Shetawi (2021) suggest, that her brother deserves imprisonment under Islamic law as both punishment and prevention. Najwa believes that Omar needs to be punished for extorting money from their mother and for the sins he commits against himself by being a drug-addict. Still, she remains loyal to her brother by visiting him in jail and supporting him. Another issue that many Arab Muslim women face in the West is based on the way they dress. Muslims, specifically women, are easily identifiable if they are wearing the traditional Islamic *hijab* or *abaya*. As a result, this has increased the risk of veiled Muslim women becoming desirable and attainable targets of Islamophobic hate crimes, especially after 9/11 (Perry, 2014).

In *Minaret*, there are several descriptions of attire and their effects on society’s perception. In the novel’s first chapters, for example, there is a comparison between the dress of provincial girls and that of capital girls. Najwa dresses in a more liberal manner wearing miniskirts and tight tops whereas provincial girls favor *tobes* and scarves. Moreover, Najwa was unable to befriend the conservative females, mostly due to her social class. She believes that she is liberal and more elite which prevents her from being friends with such girls. Later, however, she confesses that she admires how they dress in modesty and grace. Since arriving Britain, Najwa’s new perceptions about Islam and people make her understand that she has mistakenly judged people. According to Abu Awad (2011), Najwa’s experience in exile and poverty changes her prior perceptions of the appearance and behavior of the provincial girls. This is in contrast to other characters in *Minaret* like Najwa’s boyfriend Anwar who, along with her close friend Randa, criticize the way those women dress and the things they believed in. By referring to them as “retarded” and “backwards”, the two of them only create a bad impression about practicing Muslims in general and the veil in particular. Moreover, Randa goes even further by claiming that women wearing such clothes are unable to work or perform normal activities like others. After several epiphanies, Najwa later decides to start wearing the *hijab*. Standing in front of the mirror, she tries putting it on; however, her hair does not cooperate, and her curls keep escaping. Finally, seeing herself in the mirror, she utters: “I didn’t look like myself” (Aboulela 2005, p. 245). This suggests that she is trying to wear the *hijab* against her will and that she is still unsure about this decision. It was important Aboulela include this scene as it resembles the natural and healthy process of wearing the veil, which comes with full contentment.

Later on, Najwa tries on the *hijab* again and even tries on her mother’s *tobe* and is then satisfied with what she sees in the mirror. Stanecka (2018) claims that, in this scene, Najwa is finally convinced to wear the *hijab* willingly without pressure or fear of judgment. Furthermore, wearing the *hijab* and *abaya* also makes Najwa feel shielded from the unwanted gazes of men. In fact, Koç (2014) states that by wearing Najwa feels satisfied with experiencing being visible and invisible at the same time. All of this marks Najwa’s growth in her journey of self-discovery. Through Najwa, Aboulela tries to show that choosing to wear *hijab* is not an easy choice for a Muslim woman. She must feel content in wearing it and not coerced into doing so. Later, Najwa understands that she needs to be covered in public, but can dress the way she wants in front of other women or when she is alone, which makes her even more comfortable about her choice, saying “I liked feeling covered, cosy” (Aboulela 2005, p. 160). *Minaret* also highlights the fact that Najwa suffers from discrimination based on her social class and economic situation. Al-Karawi and Bahar (2014) state that Najwa was abandoned by her relatives after her father’s conviction of corruption, imprisonment and subsequent bankruptcy. This is true save her Uncle Saleh and his wife, Aunt Eva as Najwa states: “Aunt Eva had been a close friend of my mother, someone who, unlike many others, didn’t withdraw from us after what happened” (Aboulela 2005, p. 127). Still, they treat Najwa different later as Aunt Eva seems to take advantage of Najwa’s situation by hiring her to work for them as a maid, underpaying her and not allowing her to find a proper job. Nevertheless, it is

noteworthy that this situation marks Najwa's first step towards independence and self-reliance. Despite all hardships, however, Najwa is able to come up with something positive out of this incident. She experiences the feeling of being useful and earning her own money. Additionally, this helps her get more work opportunities in the West, and as a result, helps her not only survive on her own, but also adapt to her new life and the expectations of her.

However, the mistreatment and discrimination continues in her new job as a maid at Lamya's house. According to Lamya, Najwa is nothing but a maid and inferior to her. Additionally, she never considers Najwa a social equal. Najwa says, "She will always see my hijab, my dependence on the salary she gives me, my skin color, which is a shade darker than hers. She will see these things and these things only; she will not look beyond them" (Aboulela 2005, p. 116). Thus, Lamya is unable to understand that Najwa is a strong and self-reliant woman who is trying to survive on her own in the West. Koç (2014) states that Lamya looks at Najwa as an obedient and ignorant woman who needs her salary to live in Britain. In her mind, she mistakenly creates a false image that portrays Najwa as a weak creature that needs her help and money to survive. Additionally, she ignores the fact that Najwa is being paid for her and therefore earns that money. According to Rouabhia and Melaikia (2019), Lamya creates a stereotypical perception of Najwa. It is astonishing that both women are Arab migrant workers in the West, yet Lamya views herself as someone better and more powerful than Najwa because of Najwa's looks, her career, and what she wears. The final issue that will be discussed in this section is the idea of freedom in Western communities. When Najwa starts interacting with her new culture in Britain, she comes to the conclusion that she is free to do whatever she wants and that no one can blame or judge her. She understands that the British community does not adhere to the same standards and limitations as her home country. Furthermore, she believes that she can make mistakes and behave in a way that she has never behaved before. She says, "I am in London, I told myself, 'I can do what I like, no one can see me.' Fascinating. I could order a glass of wine. Who would stop me or even look surprised? There was curiosity in me, but not enough to spin me into action" (Aboulela 2005, p. 128). Accordingly, one can surmise that Najwa's behavior in Sudan is constrained by social norms and expectations, but once she is freed from them, she begins to consider defying those expectations and acting differently. She makes it clear, nevertheless, that she wants to experience new things in Britain out of pure curiosity. After all, each culture comes with a set of different expectations and limitations, and curiosity drives people to explore new things, as it does with Najwa.

Aboulela also incorporates many of the same themes that Arab women face in the West and provides some suggestions of how to overcome such issues in her novel *Bird Summons*. Nostalgia and comparing the past and the present are also major issues that the main characters suffer from in this novel. This problem has distinct effects on them. Looking at one's past can sometimes be beneficial and destructive at the same time, which is why Aboulela might be trying to remind Arab women of how to interact with their past in a way that would benefit them. To begin with, the whole novel revolves around a journey to Lady Evelyn's grave as a way to show respect for a Muslim British woman. The idea of having a role model from the past and the struggle to reach her grave is a lesson that Aboulela aims to entrench in the minds of her readers. That is, Aboulela wants to remind her readers that sometimes exploring and learning from the past are crucial to developing one's present. Aboulela presents many scenes that illustrate how the past should be used to shape the present and the future. The issue of nostalgia and comparing the past and the present are also represented in this novel through Salma. After marrying David, a British man, and moving with him to Britain, Salma starts experiencing the negative side of being married to a British man and giving birth to British children, alongside the disadvantages of living in the West. Moreover, Salma's past seems to constantly haunt her, and this is represented by the reappearance of Amir, her ex-boyfriend, in her life.

After settling down in Britain with her husband and children, Salma starts contacting Amir. As she gets to learn more about his accomplishments in Egypt she begins to doubt the decisions that she had previously made. She starts thinking about how her life would have been different if she had stayed in Egypt and never traveled to Britain. In Egypt, Salma was near her family and in her land, she spoke a language that everyone there would understand and dressed in a way that is familiar to everyone. Additionally, when David was in Salma's home country, Egypt, she was in charge of everything from talking to waiters to preventing people from taking advantage of David simply because he is a foreigner. All of these details made Salma feel important. However, in Britain, Salma finds it is quite the opposite and starts experiencing the life of foreigner. This starts to make her long for her past and feel nostalgic towards her home and what she had back there. Amirieh & Arkhagha (2021) argue that Salma experiences a revival of nostalgia towards home after contacting Amir because he reminds her of what she has left behind in Egypt. Consequently, these recollections force Salma to compare what she had in the past with what she lacks in her present, only causing her more doubt and sadness. For instance, when Amir addresses her as "Dr. Salma", she thinks about what she has truly lost by deciding to move abroad. Salma failed her medical exams in Britain and becomes a massage therapist instead. The fact that Amir becomes a doctor and Salma fails to do so, makes her feel unsatisfied about her life in Britain and long for her country and what she is offered there.

The second woman, Iman, is a Syrian woman who experiences a different sort of nostalgia. The reader is quick to understand that Iman is still traumatized by what she has experienced in her life. She was denied a normal childhood because of the war and was forced at age 15 to marry a man who was killed shortly thereafter by the government during the uprising against Assad. In order to escape the war and start a family, she marries another man and travels to Britain with him only to end up divorced and homeless on the streets of London. Moreover, whenever she communicates with her family back home in Syria, they ask her to stay in Britain and never come back, causing Iman to feel alienated. Although Iman understands that her family's reaction is due to the harsh conditions that they face in Syria, she still believes that returning and being part of a family is still better than staying where she is. This indicates that the feeling of alienation and nostalgia she is suffering from in the West is worse to her than living in war-torn Syria. She feels trapped in Britain with no hope of

escaping. What Iman is feeling is similar to what Edward Said (2002) posits about an Arab in diaspora perhaps feeling like a prisoner who is unable to return to his home. After getting divorced for the second time, Iman reflects on her traumatic past. She remembers her country before and after the war. She remembers how children used to play in alleys, the village life, and women preparing food. However, war replaced all of that with bombs, pain, and fear. Iman believes that she was born at the wrong time. She was too young to experience war let alone bear any responsibility, yet she was also too old to get the care and attention that children need. All of this leads her to feeling useless and excluded and even moreso to her country and the people back home because of her status as a Syrian refugee. However, she later discovers that she can still be of use to herself and her family by surviving in the West through being strong and hardworking.

By comparing Iman's past and her present, Aboulela wants to remind women that the West should never be seen as a place to escape harsh circumstances. She wants them to understand that the West offers its own different sort of challenges that require strength and patience. Additionally, through the character of Iman, Aboulela conveys a message that indicates that the past should never stop individuals from progressing. The issue of nostalgia and comparing the past and the present is reflected differently in Moni's case. In the past, Moni was a successful woman who had a good banking career, a healthy body, and a balanced life. However, after marrying Murtada and giving birth to a disabled son, Adam, Moni's life is turned upside-down. She starts gaining weight, and gives up on everything she previously possessed, including her career and normal daily routine. She dedicates her entire life to her child to the extent that she forgets herself and her husband. Moreover, she stops thinking of her future and is stuck with her present and with her son's condition. When Murtada brings up the topic of moving to Saudi Arabia, Moni refuses claiming that staying in Britain is better for the sake of her child. Later, however, admits later that Murtada was right when he accused her of not considering their future, saying, "Life was about getting through each day; it was no longer about futures" (Aboulela 2019, p. 25).

It cannot be denied that sometimes unity is very important in overcoming alienation and nostalgia in the West. The three ladies are part of the Arabic speaking Muslim women's group, and this proves the importance of being part of a group that shares your same language or beliefs in a country where everything seems odd and new. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that the idea of unity was examined in this novel, specifically, when the three ladies start to quarrel about their dissimilarities which causes their friendship to crack. During their journey to Lady Evelyn's grave, however, the three women start encountering some mysterious occurrences that end in a magical transformation that each of them experiences and makes them understand the importance of friendship and unity. This magical transformation forces them to rely on one another to find a way out. As a result of the transformation, their relationship begins to mend as it helps them realize that union, friendship, and support are important, especially in the West. According to Amirieh & Arkhagha (2021), the three women were able to leave the forest and their anxieties behind when they decided to unite. Aboulela might be trying to guide other Arab women by showing them that collectivity and being part of a community are important in overcoming the feelings of exclusion and alienation. It also contributes to making life in the West easier and more bearable. Additionally, she wants Arab women to understand that friendship is important and that women need to support one another in the West.

Another issue that was represented in this novel was discrimination towards Arabs living in the West be it through occupation or race. Through the struggles of different characters, Leila Aboulela was able to resolve this issue in a very unique way. Salma's situation in the West is an example of occupational discrimination. Back in her home country, she was seen as a legitimate doctor. However, when she travels to the West, her academic credentials are no longer valid. Because she graduated from an Arabic university, Salma was forced to undergo certain exams in order for the Westerners to approve and recognize her as a doctor in their country. After failing the exam twice, Salma eventually transitions from being a licensed doctor in her native country to working as a massage therapist in Scotland. This issue makes Salma feel worse and more excluded. She also starts looking at the West as a place that buries her dreams and deprives her of her rights. Moreover, this makes Salma question the fairness of this culture and whether she belongs there or not. Although being a massage therapist was not Salma's dream and a position she is not proud of, by the end of the novel she discovers that doing her job professionally and passing on her knowledge and skills has eventually helped her. Although Salma failed to become a doctor, she managed to help people and earn their trust and gratitude, and this is what matters most. Through this, Aboulela draws her readers' attention to the importance of valuing the work that individuals do.

On the other hand, Moni either prevents herself from feeling discriminated against or is so obsessed about caring for Adam that she tolerates all those feelings for his sake. In Christine Dezelar-Tiedman's review of *Birds Summons* (2020), she states that Moni refuses to join her husband in Saudi Arabia for the sake of caring for her disabled son in Britain indicating that sometimes migrants are forced to endure and suffer discrimination in order to get a benefit in return, like medical care, money, or a safe place to live. Arabs living in the West also deal with the issue of raising children in the West. There is a rift between parents and their children when a child is raised in a culture that is different from the one in which the parents were raised in. In the novel, Salma's problem is the result of the parents coming from two different cultural backgrounds – Arab and European. Salma is married to a Scottish man and has British children. However, she can't figure out how to deal with them in the best way, and she is constantly complaining about the deterioration of her relationship with them. She feels she is an outsider who unwelcomed by society and her own family. In Zipp's review of the novel (2020), she states that Salma feels that her husband and children might feel embarrassed by her because she is not British enough. She keeps making an effort to belong to this country in an attempt to strengthen her roots, despite her origins and language.

Salma also does not understand that the concept of freedom might be different among various cultures. In her Arab culture, it is normal for parents to interfere in their children's lives. However, in Western cultures, this is not acceptable. As a result, she starts interfering in the decisions of her children, and this makes her relationship with them even worse. This is especially true of her relationship with her

daughter. According to Roumayssa (2021), the discrimination issue that Salma experiences results in her being distant from her own children due to the fact that she is not giving them the freedom to choose what to study. Because Salma was unable to attain her dream of being a doctor, she wants to vicariously live that dream through her daughter. When her daughter resists the notion of becoming a doctor, it causes a great strain between them. Thus, Salma struggles with the idea that she needs to treat her children differently from how her parents treated her in the past, as noted when she says: "They would not be subservient to her as she had been to her parents" (Aboulela 2019, p. 209). She is unable to understand that the cultural differences mean she must reconsider her parenting style. Later, Iman fills in that void Salma feels. Iman is younger, shares Salwa's language, culture, and thoughts, and this makes Salma feel better. Furthermore, Iman gives Salma the indication that she will always need her help and her interference in her life. She is dependent on Salma and continuously needs her guidance. Roumayssa (2021) states that by guiding Iman and interfering in her life, Salma fills the void that her children have created.

Further, after being known as one who must always be in control, she loses that control after undergoing surgery that is performed by Amir, her previous boyfriend. This surgery makes her lose her muscles and makes her dependent on the help of others to move from one place to another. It soon makes her realize that she cannot control anyone's life, not even her own children's lives. She also understands that, regardless of whether her children belong to Britain or Egypt, they are still going to be her children who respect her. Furthermore, she finally understands that through her children, she is part of the Western culture and its history. Englund (2020), states that Salma understands that there is a binding connection between her and the country that she lives in, especially that her children carry this country's blood in their veins, and as a result, she is also one of them, regardless of her place of birth or the language she speaks. Moni's case is also related to the issue of raising children in the West. However, her case is different from Salma's, as Moni and her husband are from the same culture. The main issue that arises from the situation is Moni's obsession with her disabled son, Adam. After also being a victim of discrimination, Murtada, Moni's husband has trouble finding work and wants to relocate and move to Saudi Arabia where he believes they might have a better life. Moni, only thinking of her son and forgetting that there are three people in the family, strongly disagrees concluding that staying in Britain is the best choice for their child. Richard Marcus (2020) clarifies that, in Moni's journey to be a good mother, she forgets to be part of society or family. She pushes away her husband and friends and decides to suffer alone. Moni remembers how the people in Sudan treated Adam unkindly when they traveled there on holiday. Furthermore, Roumayssa (2021), states that due to the fact that the medical field is very developed in the West, Moni refuses to leave Britain and join her husband in Saudi Arabia.

Indeed, this journey with the other two ladies is her first step towards adaptation and change as well. She accepts leaving her son in the nursery and spending some time with the ladies. During the journey to Lady Evleyn's grave, Moni starts reminiscing about the simple things she used to do before being a mother like running, singing, and having fun - the basic activities that Moni lacks in her new life as a mother and a caregiver for Adam. This is only exacerbated on the journey when Moni meets a small boy who looks like Adam. She spends the entire trip looking and caring for him to the extent that she forgets to do anything else, and this marks her relapse. In the meantime, however, the transformation that she encounters serves as a lesson that she needs to understand - Moni is turned into a ball in the hands of Adam. This transformation serves as a reminder that she is wasting her own life entertaining her child and keeping him busy instead of actually helping him or helping herself or her family. Furthermore, a ball is round, meaning all its faces are the same, and it keeps rolling until it bumps up against a certain object. This can be applied to Moni's personality, where she is bouncing around.

On the other hand, the transformation into a ball can resemble flexibility. Amirieh and Arkhagha (2021) clarify that Moni's transformation into a ball represents her flexibility to adapt and indicates that her future would be better as a hybrid migrant. This might serve as a sort of foreshadowing that Moni would be able to finally adapt to her new situation as a mother. Aboulela might be trying to guide Arab women on how to focus on their lives and be freed from any constraints. In other words, women should be more than just a mother, sister, or a support system to anyone. In addition to that, there is no harm in being both a good mother and a female who focuses on her life and personal achievements. Iman's search for freedom and independence is another main issue many Arab women living in the West face, according to Hansson and Henriksson (2013), Arab women are usually represented as weak and obedient. However, Aboulela succeeds in taking this image to another stage where she shows the reader the development of Arab women from being weak to becoming strong and independent.

From the beginning of the novel, Iman is described as a woman who is weak, lost, and needs the support of others to get her things done. Additionally, she is struggling with her identity and does not know what she needs in life. According to Erikson (1994), the process of immigration and leaving one's homeland involves not only changing countries but also involves having multiple identities that are shared between the host country and the homeland. Iman's immigration to the West makes her question her identity and sense of belonging.

However, the reader might note that Iman's trip to Lady Evelyn's grave is a journey toward self-understanding and identity formation. In her review of *Bird Summons*, Cosslett (2019) states that Iman has never been given the chance to build her own identity because her past is full of decisions made on her behalf by others. She did not willingly choose to be married at a young age or wear the hijab, and she is never given the chance to choose on her own. When Iman was introduced to her first suitor, her mother says "no negotiations" (Aboulela 2019, p. 19), which indicates that her views and opinions were worthless to her family. Additionally, Iman constantly relies on her beauty to secure new possibilities throughout her life. Viswanathan writes in her review of *Bird Summons* (2020) that Iman realizes later that her beauty is insufficient and would not allow her to gain a stable and secure life. Iman's goal in the West is to bring her mother over and help her escape the war in Syria, but she is unable to do that because she is waiting for others to fulfill her dreams and accomplish her goals.

She believes that she needs to rely on a husband for both emotional and financial support. However, she understands later that relying on others is not enough; she needs to rely on herself in order to survive and help her mother. In the West and after three failed marriages, Iman is finally able to understand her identity and recognize what she truly wants and what she is capable of doing. She grows confident enough to stand in front of Salma and announce her independence when she tells her, "I want to be independent" (Aboulela 2019, p. 207).

By the end of the novel, the three women had been able to overcome most of their issues and fears. The journey towards Lady Evleyn's grave makes them realize their flaws and fears and forces each one of them to confront those fears. Moni is able to go beyond the pre-set limitations that she had in mind in terms of her capability and body. She manages to walk further than she has expected and this might be an indication that she is willing to change, adapt, and be better towards herself and others. Additionally, despite all odds, Salma is able to reach Lady Evleyn's grave alone. This suggests that she is capable of reaching her goals in terms of belonging to Britain. Finally, although Iman does not reach Lady Evleyn's grave, she is able to understand how to be an independent woman by looking for a job. The "Help Wanted" sign that Iman sees at the hostel resembles a sign addressed to her that reminds her that she can be helpful, independent, feminine and strong at the same time.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, Leila Aboulela makes an effort to broaden the focus on and draw awareness to problems that Arab women might encounter in the West. Both novels depict the journey of Arab women to the West and the various kinds of challenges they are exposed to. The main characters in both novels had to deal with a variety of problems, starting with developing nostalgia for their native countries and drawing comparisons between their past and their present. The novels show different experiences with nostalgia and introduce ways to overcome it in a healthy way. As mentioned earlier, both novels serve as an extension to what Arab women encounter in the West and the guidance and advice that the author is trying to provide her readers with. *Minaret*, provides the reader with suggested lessons from the perspective of one main character and what she encounters in the West. However, in *Bird Summons*, the reader is exposed to more than one character and is able to trace their development and spot the lessons behind each incident that they encounter. The guidance in *Minaret* revolves mainly around the new life that Najwa is experiencing in the West compared to her previous luxurious past. Through *Minaret*, Leila Aboulela aims to encourage women to stay strong regardless of what happens around them. Additionally, it can be noticed that the sole idea is about individualism and how to maintain a strong identity in the West.

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