Out of Materialistic Ideologies and into the Mosque: The Neutralizing Power of Spirituality in Leila Aboulela’s *Minaret*

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Abstract

This paper examines the function of the mosque in Leila Aboulela’s fiction, focusing mainly on *Minaret*. To realize this goal, the study elucidates the forms of materialism that burden the world of *Minaret*, demonstrating how this world is pulled between two conflicting material ideologies that paralyze Najwa, the protagonist. The eventual malfunctioning of these two ideological paradigms is gradually neutralized (through Najwa’s experience) by the spiritual power accorded to her through the mosque. Najwa’s spiritual transformation takes place over a long period of being intermittently touched by mystical sparks that make her self-conscious of a deeply buried spiritual space in her personality, which has been detrimentally marginalized by the materialistic ideologies governing her former lifestyle. The mosque’s spiritual function is further stressed in the way Aboulela disconnects the mosque’s spirituality from any physicality. When the mosque is shown to have any spiritual effects, its corporeal value ceases to exist.

Keywords: Leila Aboulela; *Minaret*; the Mosque; Spirituality; Materialism.

The Mosque, Ideology, and Politics: An Introduction

In the fiction of Leila Aboulela, mosques are foregrounded as influential houses of worship emblematizing important Islamic ideals, and this symbolic condition is stressed in the title of one of Aboulela’s most studied works: *Minaret* (2005). Standing as the uppermost visible part of the mosque, the minaret attracts the reader’s attention physically and symbolically to the foremost religious values associated with this symbolic signification in Islamic societies. Of course, this spiritual symbolism in Aboulela’s work cannot be disconnected from the various aspects of sacred rituals and forms of worship performed at the mosque and premised upon numinous beliefs revered by Muslims the world over. The emblematic dimension of mosques is also linked to their religious, educational, and social role in the everyday lives of Muslims. In Aboulela’s work, this role becomes further accentuated in the case of mosques located in territories with Muslim minorities, and it becomes equally significant when seen from the perspective of people with minimal knowledge of Islamic beliefs and traditions.

The aim of this article, therefore, is to establish the function of the mosque in Aboulela’s fiction and the way the mosque’s role can then be constructively effective in the lives of individuals. To achieve this
goal, the study will first explore how polarizing ideologies can be spiritually crippling, especially in profoundly secularized locales. When the individual’s life becomes hampered by material ideologies, as some characters are figured in Aboulela’s fiction, the mosque is characterized as having the neutralizing power that can de-ideologize and depolarize the individual’s consciousness, and ultimately ease materialistic burdens. What this study aims ultimately and simply to do is to spell out how this process is made possible in Aboulela’s work. Emphasis will principally be laid on Aboulela’s Minaret, as this novel’s elemental constituents (mainly its characters and settings) are notably developed around the mosque, whose function can thus be gradually reconstructed.

Of all the studies that have thus far been conducted on Minaret in particular (and Aboulela’s fiction in general), none has attempted to tease out the function of the mosque or at least follow up the full symbolic implication of the title. However, many of these studies handled the novel’s spirituality and religiosity from various perspectives, which can be categorized into two leading groups in line with two subsequent concerns. First, Minaret’s religious dimension has been contextualized within a postcolonial, cross-cultural encounter between East and West, and Aboulela’s work has consequently been positioned within a literary tradition of writing back to the West (see Awajan and Al-Shetawi 2021; Bibizadeh 2015; Canpolat 2016; Chambers 2011; Churilla 2011; Gilmour 2012; Hasan 2015; Hassan 2008; Mustafa 2009). The majority of Aboulela’s critics support this critical stance, arguing in favor of viewing religion as a tool used by Aboulela in her anti-discursive attempt to challenge a Eurocentric stereotypical discourse about Orientals in general and Oriental women in particular. Wail Hassan (2008), for instance, reads Aboulela’s work in light of the previous generation of Arab writers, like Tayeb Salih, whose appropriation of Western literary forms (especially the novel) is utilized to invalidate various Orientalist tropes. Moreover, Nosaybah Awajan and Mahmoud Al-Shetawi (2021), in their recent study on the representation of Islam in Aboulela’s Minaret and Mohja Kahf’s The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf, suggest that both Aboulela and Kahf “try contradicting the images the West has about Islam” (2021, 128). Within this same context of intercultural contact, the concept of ‘translation’ has been used in the sense of translating more accurately (to the West) the true Islamic culture. Other critics approached Minaret’s religious tendency from what they term an “Islamic feminist” perspective, with a focus on the marginalization of Muslim women. It has also been suggested that the role of religion and the mosque in Minaret lies in empowering Najwa’s sense of identity.

The second group of studies deals with the topic of religion in Minaret from an Islamic-historical perspective, whereby the novel’s religiosity has been pigeonholed in the light of different religious and Islamist groups (see Abbas 2011; Hassan 2008; Zulfiqar 2015). In doing so, these critical attempts have groped for an ‘Islamic’ label to dub the type of faith offered in Minaret. A clear example is Sadia Zulfiqar’s claim that “the kind of Islam Aboulela depicts in her work is Sufi” (2015, 153). Sadia Abbas, moreover, uses other labels to provide her speculative interpretation of the novel’s “Islamist” agenda that, according to Abbas, supports “right-wing” Islamism in disguise (2011, 447–8). Abbas also turns to the characteristics that she believes necessary to render a novel (like Aboulela’s) religious, and she claims ironically that Aboulela avoids these characteristics to make the novel “halal” (2011, 455).
The above studies reveal how far this critical tradition has gone in attempting to read Aboulela’s work, dubbing it with imposed, structuralist labels. Based on this brief review, Aboulela’s fiction is presumed to be either apologetic, (culturally) translational, anti-discursive, Sufi, Islamist, fundamentalist, idealized, or (ironically) halal. However, when it comes to the issue of the mosque, these critical outlooks exhibit some problematic concerns. First, aligning Minaret within the same fictional paradigm of Aboulel’s other works, mainly The Translator (1999), is critically fallacious because the protagonists’ cultural experience in both novels is totally different. For Minaret (unlike The Translator) does not show any cultural contact with Western characters even though London is part of the setting. This article will show how the mosque, so to speak, is de-culturalized. Second, Minaret has been projected with a set of essentialized political tropes and burdened with religious issues and outlooks that, as this study intends to show, seem to have never been intended. The story is simply about an ordinary person whose religious experience is associated with the mosque and who clearly has no political or ideological interests. While there exists a set of political ideologies in Minaret (discussed below), the mosque and religion are far from being ideologized or politicized, and this is one of the important findings substantiated in this study.

Third, to bring it all back then, the mosque in Aboulela’s work has not received due critical attention and proper analysis although it is there standing as an attention-grabbing edifice at the heart of Minaret. The mosque is figured in a specific (meta)physical form that helps the reader grasp what the author suggests about its function, which can only be reconstructed by locating the mosque within the novel’s central conflict. In other words, the novel exhibits a specific form of conflict between material(istic) powers that govern the world of the novel, and these powers minimize greatly the presence of any spiritual dimension. What makes spirituality functional in this materialistic world is the mosque, and this fact can be ascertained by observing how Aboulela configures the (meta)physical representation of the mosque, whose spiritual power is meant to neutralize the different forms of materialism in Minaret. It is this point that has not been touched upon by Aboulela critics. What follows, then, is a delineation of the first layer of conflict, developed clearly in the opening chapters.

**Torn between Two ‘Materialisms’**

The story of Minaret revolves around the character of Najwa and the tragedy that befalls her family. The daughter of a wealthy Sudanese high-ranking official, Najwa enjoys a prestigious, liberal, and affluent life while studying at the University of Khartoum. However, she is forced to leave Sudan to London along with her mother and brother, Omar, after a coup that ends up with the execution of her father. Toward the end of the story, her mother dies in London, Omar is imprisoned, and Najwa ends up forsaken and penniless. This oversimplified plot is developed through a clash between two solidly established, materialistic ideologies, and Najwa is positioned in the war zone between these powerful paradigms. It is only when this conflict is deconstructed that the function of the mosque can be accurately characterized. That is, the neutralizing role of the mosque can be foregrounded only when the effect of the two forms of materialism fragmenting Najwa’s subjectivity is fully analyzed.
To begin with, the most visible feature that is painstakingly showcased about Najwa, her family, and her larger social network is the degree to which they are westernized. The opening chapters of the novel take the reader into the private sphere of Najwa’s house and show minute details about her family’s westernized life. The posters of Michael Jackson decorating Omar’s room; the songs of Bob Marley, Boney M, and the Bee Gees; videos of *Top of The Pops* circulated among Omar and his friends; the western fashions of their dress and hairstyles; their English accents; the American club visited regularly by Omar and Najwa; the disco dancing they impressively master there; and the westernized parties offered at their house are but few examples of the family’s western way of life. What is more striking is the fact that these aspects are more foregrounded in Sudan than in London. When the picture is zoomed out, it becomes obvious that most of Najwa’s Arab social network, especially in Sudan, is equally westernized. This fact is most featured in the special events that Aboulela details in the novel, like the parties at the American club, exhibiting the same *un-Sudanized* features we see in Najwa’s house. Significantly, the accuracy of this vivid visualization of a westernized lifestyle replicates the author’s westernized experience in Khartoum, a fact that is stressed by Aboulela in more than one occasion (see Aboulela 2002b, 204; Chambers 2009, 92; Rashid 2012, 617).

For the generation of Najwa, this westernization seems to reflect a culture that is characterized by three ideological facets. First, the essence of this ideology rejects all that is not Western, a fact that is verbalized outspokenly by Omar, who (according to Najwa) “believed we had been better off under the British and it was a shame that they left” (11-12), and for whom “anything Western was unmistakably and unquestionably better than anything Sudanese” (131–2). Najwa’s indoctrination is not different, as they both always argue with their parents about pursuing higher education in London. For both Najwa and Omar, this is a privilege reflecting the superiority of what is Western and render them elitist. The second ideological feature of this culture is its material(istic) inclination. The physical exhibition of the flamboyant, sensory aspects of this westernized lifestyle attracts the reader’s attention to how visually and auditorily its materiality is accentuated. Such audio-visual effects are most perceived in the aspects mentioned above. What is more important, however, is the prioritization of material wealth and acquisitions. The world of *Minaret* makes it seem as though being westernized (or Londonized) and belonging to well-to-do families are quite inseparable. *All* westernized families in the novel clearly enjoy material privileges not obtainable for others, and the London of the novel is made accessible to them through their material affordability. Their wealth, moreover, is concomitant with a capitalist history that is associated with the British, and this association is spelled out by Najwa: “I was an aristocrat, yes, from my mother’s side with a long history of acres of land and support for the British and hotels in the capital and bank accounts aboard” (37–8). Najwa’s claim crystalizes the capitalist tendency of this ideology, given the reality of accumulating wealth by whatever means, most visible in the case of Najwa’s father, whose “life story,” according to Najwa, “was of how he moved from a humble background to become manager of the President’s office via marriage into an old wealthy family” (8). Moreover, ‘capitalist’ is the label used by opponents to describe westernized people. Anwar, for example, calls them “Landowning families, capitalists, [and] the aristocracy” (11).
The third aspect of this ideology is hegemonic nature in the sense theorized by Antonio Gramsci (1971) and further developed by Raymond Williams (1977). That is, westernized young people like Najwa are not feigning western habits; the issue is not simply a matter of choice. Rather, the unconscious internalization of this lifestyle is attributed to being brought up in a westernized environment, adopted mainly by their parents. The London of the novel seems quite familiar to them just like Khartoum, given the time they spent there. Therefore, these ideological characteristics (i.e., elitist, capitalist, and hegemonic) will stand as challenging obstacles in the process of Najwa’s spiritual transformation, discussed below. They are responsible for disconnecting Najwa from any form of spirituality, whose effect becomes visible on Najwa only when she becomes associated with mosque.

The second ideological power affecting Najwa is communism, which is given a material reality and force through Najwa’s acquaintances at the university. It is foregrounded through the character of Anwar Al-Sir, who is “a member of the Democratic Front, the students’ branch of the Communist Party” (11). Anwar is a political activist who has a substantial role in enforcing and propagating Communist principles, as he is always an enthusiastic and committed participant in most Communist activities. Anwar writes on a weekly basis for the Front newspaper, and he always gives flamboyant, political speeches, attacking sharply the bourgeoisie. Most of his ideological beliefs are also disclosed through his relationship with Najwa: his opposition to the bourgeoisie, his severe criticism of social traditions, his political attitude to the regime, his denunciation of the country’s maldistribution of wealth, and his nationalistic disapproval of westernized habits. What is significant about Anwar is his influence on Najwa, who is blindly attracted to his character. While Najwa’s mind and behavior are fully westernized (or rather capitalized), her heart is communized. Najwa loves him, and he largely controls her emotions and behavior in a way that is ideologically convincing and pleasing only for him, not for her. For example, to gratify him, she tries to show him her fake interest in Russian authors, and she sometimes bothers being lost among books that are intelligible to him, not to her. Her behavior toward him makes her not the person who she truly is, and she is aware of this fact: “When I spoke, my voice sounded strange to my ears, as if it were not me” (12).

The economics Professor is also another important character who performs a function similar to Anwar’s. While the latter signals the power of communism among university students, the former reflects the effect of this power on the level of the university faculty. The Professor’s influence is manifested clearly in the fifth chapter when he thwarts Najwa’s hopes about Rostow’s Take-off, which is a capitalist theory, with the Marxist criticism he provides. The academic scene appears to be thoroughly dominated by a communist ethos, and the Professor (who is not given a name) is simply expressing a type of academic discourse that is generalized on campus. This observation is further substantiated by Najwa’s comments on Omar’s colonialist beliefs: “I made sure that he [Omar] didn’t write these ideas in any of his History or Economics essays. He would surely fail because all the books and lecturers said that colonialism was the cause of our underdevelopment” (12).

This conflict between capitalism and communism is detrimental to Najwa’s spirituality, for Najwa is fragmented between her physical, westernized lifestyle and her communized affection for Anwar. This
internal conflict is paralleled by an outer one, functioning as destructive machinery for the whole world of *Minaret*. Anwar tries clearly to initiate a tangible change, and he is ready to do whatever it takes to make this change a reality, even if it means violence.\textsuperscript{13} The tendency for violence is mutual because those in Najwa’s ideological camp will not hesitate to do anything to ward off any social rupture caused by communists. An obvious example is the way Najwa’s father would act if Anwar ever tries to get married to Najwa, as Omar insinuates that his father will act like gangsters then, and he asks, “[D]o you know what Baba will do to him? Send him some thugs to beat him up” (50). This violence has already been displayed by the capitalist government against communist activists like Anwar. Najwa tells us that “[w]ith pride, Anwar told me that the secret police had a file on him” (35), which means that he could end up in prison just like his uncles, who “had been imprisoned for membership of the Communist Party” (36).

The fact that both ideological systems fail can easily be ascertained. The capitalist government is uprooted by the coup, Najwa’s father is executed, her brother is imprisoned, and her uncle leaves her to her fate. Similarly, the next communist government is displaced in another coup, and its prominent exponents are shown to be merely hypocritical opportunists, like Anwar who eventually exploits her sexually and financially, leaving her penniless. This simple conclusion has already been pointed out by Aboulela critics (see Al-Karawi and Bahar 2014, 258; Bibizadeh 2015, 81). However, what this article proposes here is that the damage done to Najwa is far more complicated, as she is paralyzed by complex layers of obstacles. She is psychologically fragmented and physically dislocated by this conflict, and her cultural background adds further materialistic, hegemonic impediments to any spiritual redemption. It is precisely in this troubling situation that the function of the mosque is introduced, and here it is necessary to emphasize yet two important caveats. First, although the conflict between the capitalist and communist paradigms seems resolved when the communists seize power tentatively, Aboulela insists on the ongoing nature of this conflict. After the communist government is deposed, the country is left in a state of confusion, and *Minaret* remains silent about the outcome of this second coup.\textsuperscript{14} Instead of focusing on the country’s situation after the second coup, the narrative continues to foreground the same old conflict.\textsuperscript{15} Second, the argument that the world of Najwa is torn between two ideological blocs shall not contradict that the mosque (or the people associated with it) is neither politicized nor ideologized.\textsuperscript{16} Rather, Aboulela is writing about the effects of this conflict on the ordinary individual who is not well-versed or interested in politics or history, just like Najwa. What follows below is an explanation of how the capitalist-communist conflict is transformed into another clash between the two paradigms discussed above and the spiritual power coming from the mosque.

**Spiritual Poverty and Transformation**

The malfunctioning of the two ideological systems discussed above results in severe repercussions for Najwa, and these ramifications are most visible in her lack and denial of all that is spiritual and metaphysical. Najwa’s life is totally controlled by the grip of different forms of materialism, which renders Najwa’s reality fragmented and devoid of any sense of belonging. This psychological condition is symptomatic of a behavioral disorder, which is a by-product of the sum of social relationships and powers
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affecting her. For none of the supporters and representatives of both models, who are similarly haunted by material interests, could offer any spiritual support. Najwa could not see anything from a spiritual perspective, especially in cases when spirituality is desperately needed, and she continues to look at everything from a materialistic perspective. Najwa’s relationship with Anwar, for example, is devoid of any spiritual dimensions, for Najwa is only physically attracted to him. All the descriptive details Najwa reports about Anwar reveal how she is impressed by Anwar’s outer appearance. Nowhere does she hint at any form of a spiritual bond between them. Even when she browses the newspaper by the Front on campus, she is only impressed by the physical shape of Anwar’s writings. While reading, she admits that “the colours of the letters and the beauty of the handwriting distracted me from the meaning of the words” (34–5). When she also takes issue with Anwar, she handles such disputes naively, without seeing beyond physical appearances. For instance, when Anwar attacks her father in one of his speeches, she retaliates by getting elegantly dressed: “by looking good I would annoy Anwar or show him that I didn’t care” (42).

Najwa’s lack of spirituality is a major setback in all aspects of her attempts to understand her predicament, and her rational awareness is simply recycled within the boundaries of the discourse of her social network. This discourse rejects anything spiritual or metaphysical in the broadest sense of the word.

However, Najwa goes through a drastic transformation whereby her understanding of her reality and social position becomes disconnected from any logic of materiality and is shifted into a spiritual one. Immediately before this transformation, Najwa experiences a transitional period where she gets intermittently touched by a spiritual force that sparks in fleeting moments unintelligible to her. These mystical, transitory moments are generated indirectly by the mosque, and they come like a rapid, inarticulate call that pierces her heart in a state of serenity, especially when she hears the azan or sees people performing prayers. The early chapters of the novel flash to the reader several spiritual moments. In the third chapter, for instance, when Najwa comes back home (from the American club) at a late hour of the night, she hears the dawn (or Fajr) azan, which has a tremendous effect on her: “The sound of the azan, the words and the way the words sounded went inside me […] it passed through the fun I had had at the disco and it went to a place I didn’t know existed. A hollow place. A darkness that would suck me in and finish me” (31). This spiritual spark makes her aware of the existence of this unexplored spiritual area. She adds further that “I could hear another mosque echoing the words, tapping at the sluggishness in me, nudging at a hidden numbness” (31). The “tapping” and “nudging” process is presented as an unintelligible attempt to unite the spiritual and the physical, her soul and body. This spiritual moment comes like a struggle for reviving what is already dead in her, and it comes from the mosque.

Moreover, after the economics class (about Rostow’s take-off), Najwa describes the scene where she observes some students performing congregational prayers on campus. The effect of this scene occupies her consciousness in a way that is, once again, never intelligible to her. The spirituality associated with the act of prayer, performed outdoors, touches fleetingly the same deep undiscovered space in Najwa’s soul, making her self-conscious of something whose lack is troubling her. While watching the students praying, she gets disappointed when Anwar approaches her: “I felt as if he was interrupting me,” she
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says, “from what, I didn’t know” (44). She adds further, after leaving the place, that “I couldn’t see the students praying anymore and I felt a stab of envy for them […] What was there to envy?” (44). Najwa never forgets the baffling feeling associated with this scene, even after moving to London. The scene of students performing prayer on campus is important for a twofold reason. First, once Najwa recalls it, she becomes unconsciously held by a series of spiritual images and sounds that are mostly associated with the mosque, establishing the latter as the source of this spiritual force.

Second, this scene dramatizes the condition of spirituality in the novel before Najwa’s transformation, as it symbolically condenses the drama of conflict in *Minaret*. In particular, the scene exhibits three types of people: the first two types (communists and westernized characters) are completely disconnected from any spiritual value and thus do not join the congregational prayer. While watching students praying, Najwa says, “Not everyone prayed. Girls like me who didn’t wear tobes or hijab weren’t praying and you could tell which boys were members of the Front, because they weren’t praying” (43). This fact is stressed in the case of the Professor, as one of the students tells Najwa “[b]ecause he’s a communist, he’s not bothered about the prayers” (43). What is attention-grabbing is the fact that these two types are identified and foregrounded in the novel through characters who are given a voice and allowed to speak. Communists like Anwar and the Professor express their views freely, and we (the readers) know a lot about their ideological sentiments. The same is true about westernized people like Najwa, Omar, Randa, and other members of their families. However, those who are associated with prayer, the mosque, and spirituality, those who perform the act of prayer within the same scene, remain in the shade and are not given any voice. In short, we know nothing about them.

What is true about these three types in this scene applies also to the same types of characters in the whole novel. That is, the narrative focuses mainly on communists and capitalists but does not give any details about people associated with spirituality even though they exist. They are an integral part of the world of *Minaret*, and they appear and disappear unexpectedly and evanescently, exactly like the spiritual spark that calls on Najwa from time to time. For example, when Najwa comes home with Omar after the party at the American club, we see servants at their house waking up for the dawn prayer, and Najwa continues to remember the fact that, in their house, “only the servants prayed” (95). Strangely, such people have no position in the conflict or the political scene in the novel. Nevertheless, though their thinking and feelings are not verbalized, the agency of such people (associated with spirituality) will become intelligible through Najwa’s character after her transformation, for she becomes one of them.

Among those performing the act of prayer in the scene mentioned above are some female students whom Najwa observes while at the library. Najwa describes how these girls are different because of their tobes: “With them I felt, for the first time in my life, self-conscious of my clothes” (14). The gap between Najwa and these girls is not ascribed to the latter’s dressing style; it is rather caused by the girls’ spiritual aura, or “modest grace” (14). Through the library scene, Aboulela is documenting a feeling she experienced herself, which is emphasized on more than an occasion (see Chambers 2009, 92; Rashid 2012, 617). While the hijab has been interpreted by Aboulela critics as a “protection from the sexist gaze” (Canpolat 2016, 227), “a sign of religious awareness” (Al-Karawi and Bahar 2014, 267), and a means for
hiding the true identity of women (Zulfikar 2015), this study suggests that the veil shows how Najwa cannot go beyond physical boundaries, for she could not comprehend the spiritual ‘substance’ that makes these subaltern girls different from her. Immediately after this scene, she reads a book of poetry:

I understood the line ‘I’ve lived to bury my desires’. But I did not know from where this understanding came. I had a happy life. My father and mother loved me and were always generous. In the summer we went for holidays in Alexandria, Geneva and London. There was nothing that I didn’t have, couldn’t have. […] And yet, sometimes, I would remember pain like a wound that had healed, sadness like a forgotten dream. (14–15)

Despite the ostensible happiness she enjoys, she admits that there are still those unfulfilled desires, which are noticeably recalled upon the appearance of these girls. Such desires have decidedly to do with spirituality.

These spiritual desires will only be fulfilled after the last step that Najwa has yet to pass before her transformation: the freedom to choose, which is only possible in London. There she can continue a Western lifestyle, and there is also Anwar with whom she can be reunited, and there are those women who invited her to the mosque. All choices are there. Najwa finds this condition puzzling but attractive: ‘‘I’m in London,’’ I told myself, ‘I can do what I like, no one can see me.’ Fascinating” (128). Freedom is stressed as a Cartesian experience for Najwa, to eventually see through all material barriers. This is precisely René Descartes’ aim when he went into seclusion: “being untroubled by any cares or passions, I remained all day alone in a warm room. There I had plenty of leisure to examine my ideas” (1960, 10). In London, Najwa is free to see more vividly through all ideological obstacles and eventually break away from the grip of the materialism of her social network. It is only then the spiritual doses to which she is subjected become more powerful and associated with the mosque and God. Thus, Najwa’s journey to London is essentially a spiritual one. In London, the effect of the mosque becomes more visible and functional in Najwa’s life, and thus she will be introduced to a spiritual realm that she never experienced before.

After Najwa “had come down in the world” (239), she finally finds a way out through the mosque, whereby she comes to terms with all the material obstacles culturally and ideologically suffocating her. The turning point occurs when she meets the Egyptian Wafaa, along with other women, who come to prepare Najwa’s dead mother for the funeral. The first thing we learn about these women is their association with the mosque (135), which becomes a fixed pattern explaining where spirituality is generated. Najwa becomes thus stricken by the same feeling of spiritual emptiness: “I felt that same bleakness in me. I became aware of that hollow place. Perhaps that was where the longing for God was supposed to come from and I didn’t really have it” (135). The source of spirituality crystallizes gradually into a religious construct essentialized in a powerful relationship with God. This is where Wafaa begins to help Najwa get transferred from the realm of materialism to that of spirituality. Wafaa reminds her of God: “Wafaa taught me a specific prayer – asking Allah to wash my mother’s sins with water and ice” (135). This prayer continues to resonate in her mind thereafter. She remembers it while with the
communist Anwar and the westernized Eva, and on both occasions the same prayer is transmuted into “Wash my sins with ice” (145; 159), rendering Najwa the one who is spiritually dead and truly needs God. While with Eva, this prayer comes like an urgent call for spiritual help, as Eva shows her how the people in her social class (including Najwa’s parents) are crippled by sensuality and materialism. The mosque will empower Najwa’s religious spirituality by getting her closer to God.

Importantly, the spiritual sparks discussed above and the spiritual guidance provided by Wafaa and the other women at the mosque eventually help Najwa become one of those who are clearly associated with spirituality and the mosque. She ultimately becomes a religious person, and this is clear in her attending the mosque on regular basis, her yearning to go to Hajj, wearing the hijab, and attending religious educational meetings. It is worth mentioning that some of the important effects of the mosque on Najwa have already been pointed out by Aboulela critics. Awajan and Al-Shetawi (2021), for example, explain how Najwa could find in the mosque safety, company, means of education, social solidarity, and stability. It has been suggested that “Najwa feels family like affection by connecting with the mosque community” (Abdullah 2017, 158). Moreover, the mosque’s role in helping Najwa restore her sense of identity has also been emphasized: “In the mosque Najwa encountered a number of women representing various cultural and ethnic backgrounds. They were all united by Islam and the sense of purpose” (Stanecka 2018, 77).

The mosque’s foremost effect is the unsurpassed spiritual capacity that Najwa possesses now. The mosque becomes a station that provides her with a renewable power that makes her better equipped to overcome any difficulty: “I would leave the mosque refreshed, wide awake and calm, almost happy” (243). What is equally important is the fact that she now understands the nature of this change; she realizes that true power is that which is not material but rather safeguarding her soul. Just like Najwa, Tamer (who becomes spiritually close to her) experiences the same spiritual revitalization through the mosque. After spending the last days of Raman in the mosque, Tamer comes back with renewed spirituality. Najwa’s spiritual transformation does not take place overnight; her spiritualized perspective continues to solidify over a long period until it shifts into one that is devoid of any materialistic residues. She expresses her wish to become a spirit or a pure soul, that transcends any physical level: “Sometimes I want to die; not out of despair or fear but just to step away from life and stand in the shade, watch it roll on without me, changeable and aggressive” (255). This ‘death wish’ is not, of course, meant to be the traditional death, for she does not mean to be disconnected from life. She simply wants to do away with all physicality.

The (Non)physical Mosque

This paper has thus far focused primarily on a pivotal question – ‘what is the significance of the mosque?’ Accordingly, the mosque has been established as the source of spirituality neutralizing the pains, detriments, and eventual failures of ideological paradigms at odds with one another. However, there is a more crucial question that needs to be equally addressed: how is the mosque represented? Answering the latter question is indispensable to answering the former because how the mosque is
represented is what the mosque represents; the ‘how’ and ‘what’ have been well crafted by Aboulela within the same thematic and symbolic framework. In all the scenes where Najwa gets spiritually touched by visual or auditory stimuli, the focus in the above discussion is on Najwa’s response and her gradual spiritual development. However, if we simultaneously keep an eye out for the image and form of the mosque that is made to initiate specifically these metaphysical impetuses, we will find that the existence of the mosque in all these scenes is characterized by zero physicality. That is, while we can see the spiritual effect of the mosque (especially on Najwa), the mosque itself is not given any form of material existence; it is not physically there.

Indeed, the mosque’s physicality and spirituality are never brought together, and if either of them is spotlighted, the other instantaneously ceases to exist. Nowhere do we see Najwa getting spiritually moved by anything associated with the mosque while the latter is physically around in the same setting. The scene of congregational prayer on campus is a clear example where the spiritual effect on Najwa is heightened by an act that is considered the foremost ritual performed at the mosque, but the physical mosque is not shown or even given any hint within the same scene. The same condition applies to the physical mosque when Najwa and Omar return home from the American club, for she gets metaphysically affected by the sound of the azan coming from the mosques, but no such mosques are physically spotted around. Other examples of the power of the nonphysical mosque include Najwa’s getting spiritually touched by the women who came from the mosque to wash the body of her dead mother, by Wafaa’s invitation to her for joining the women at the mosque, and by her talk with Tamer about the lecture at the mosque (in chapter 15). Moreover, when she happens to see the “Ka’bah and pilgrims walking around it” on TV (98), this image sets off a series of spiritual ruminations that make her mind and spirit transcend all worldly/physical trappings and begin to reflect on purely metaphysical aspirations. Tamer also has the same metaphysical experience as he comes back from his seclusion at the mosque (during the month of Ramadan) in a miserable physical condition but with a well-fed soul. Najwa immediately notices the difference: “He looked right through me, his eyes clear and shining, as if he really could see other things, as if he had been through a cleansing, humbling experience” (189). Once more, the physical mosque is not shown, but its effect is, and the mosque’s symbolic form precisely matches the thematic content of its affected spirituality.

On the other hand, when the mosque is physically shown in the narrative, the focus becomes on material, worldly pursuits, and the mosque’s spiritual effect becomes then extremely minimized or completely absent. In all the episodes where Najwa goes to the mosque and where religious celebrations are sometimes being held, the descriptions of ongoing activities are bereft of the immaterial spirits experienced in the previous examples. In chapter 10, for instance, Najwa joins other women at the Quran recitation (Tajweed) class in the mosque, and her stay there does not seem to bear any spiritual effect on her character. Instead, the emphasis is shifted to material activities that are not associated with any spiritual outcomes. Such social activities can be organized at localities other than the mosque. Social communication, joking, playing with children, Tajweed discussions, side talks, and celebrations are among the various activities performed along with the act of congregational prayers at the mosque. Most
of the time such activities seem to minimize the supposed level of spirituality usually felt there. Even while Najwa performs the congregational prayer with the other women at the mosque, the act of prayer (which is the most important activity there) does not yield the underlying spirituality expected out of it. In the same chapter, while joining the congregational prayer, Najwa’s consciousness takes the form of a series of distractions, only observing who is doing what and being conscious of her inability to distinguish the women standing next to her:

Shahinaz carries him [her child] when we all pray Isha. She puts him down on the floor whenever she bends down and then picks him up again. I stand next to her and I realize in the middle of the prayer that I don’t know who is next to me on the other side, whose arm is brushing my right arm, whose clothes are brushing my clothes. I pull my mind back and concentrate. (79)

The feelings she had while watching others performing prayers (like the scene of congregational prayer on campus) are not experienced while she performs the prayer at the mosque. Even the lessons she takes at the mosque, which are supposed to enhance her spiritual feelings, are not affecting her spiritually as sometimes they get engaged in disputes that can damage any intended spiritual outcomes. Najwa abstains from offering any view because she “become[s] anxious that someone’s feelings will get hurt, or worse take serious offence, as sometimes happens, and stop coming to the mosque” (79).

The other episode where the physical mosque is disconnected from metaphysical stimuli takes place in chapter 24, which offers a detailed description of the Eid party held by the Muslim community at the mosque. The narrative displays the physical aspects of this gathering, which is figured in a jolly mood, with the women dressed in cheerful clothes without their hijabs. Although Um Waleed gives a speech on spiritual issues and on how they must continue their devout piety after Ramadan just like they used to be during Ramadan, Najwa’s consciousness is overwhelmingly occupied by the physical outer appearances of the women attending the party. Exhaustive details are recounted through her eyes about how the women seem different now without the hijab (see 185–6). Najwa is impressed by their dresses, spontaneity, and make-up, and the event seems a highly alluring spectacle to her. However, the spirituality that has been associated with the mosque is thoroughly submerged by the physical glamour of the party.

Notably, the representation of the mosque seems consistent in Aboulela’s works in general, for in Lyrics Alley Aboulela shows the same depiction of the mosque, whose metaphysical function is made contingent upon the mosque’s (in)corporeality. The work is mainly set in Sudan and revolves around the story of the Abuzeids and the suffering they go through after their son Nur becomes paralyzed in an accident. This story is different from Aboulela’s other works in the sense that, according to the author, “there’s not really one central character” (Chambers 2009, 91) and that the story is reported “from several characters’ points of view” (Chambers 2009, 90). However, all characters are entangled in the main plot, which pertains to the family of Abuzeids. The only exception is the Egyptian teacher Ustaz Badr whose position in the narrative seems anomalous, being an outsider with no clear relationship with the other characters. He is yet the only character associated with spirituality and whose role is figured as a moral
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center, and this fact has already been pointed out by Aboulela critics (see Hunter 2013, 96–7; Abdel Wahab 2014, 226). Badr’s spirituality allows him to overcome various problems, and his “faith […] guides him into enduring the hardships of displacement, alienation and marginalization” (Awad 2014, 71). Moreover, he provides positive spiritual energy for those surrounding him, especially Nur, Nabilah, and his cousin Shukry. This explains why, despite his limited material capabilities (most manifested in his poverty), he is the only one whose life seems to move smoothly and peacefully, with all his dreams realized by the end, while all others remain troubled by various concerns.

Badr’s spiritual power is linked with the mosque, where his experience in terms of (in)corporeality is identical with Najwa’s. There are two major scenes in *Lyrics Alley* where the mosque is featured to have the same representation spotlighted in *Minaret*, and both scenes take place at King Farouk Mosque in Khartoum, with Badr joining the congregation prayer. In both scenes, the mosque is portrayed with one of two configured shapes. In the first scene, we are told that the mosque is being rehabilitated, and because of ongoing construction works (funded by King Farouk), the act of congregational prayer could not be performed inside the building. The prayer, therefore, takes place “in the garden on King Street, near the building site of the Farouk Mosque” (58). During the prayer, Badr experiences vivid, spiritual feelings that strikingly transfer him to an invisible sphere where he can feel the presence of angels: “he sensed the congregation swelling with invisible worshippers. So palatable was their presence that it was as if the barrier separating their world from that of mankind had thinned and become transparent” (58). The impact of this spiritual, transcendental experience is so powerful on Badr that the narrator spends a long passage detailing and corroborating how Badr is allowed, during the prayer, to be in touch with the world of angels:

He wanted to confirm that this was not an ordinary maghrib prayer, but one in which one or more of Allah’s powerful servants had participated. He was almost certain that inhuman creatures, who could neither be seen nor touched, had prayed too. And the reasons for this attendance, and the consequences of this attendance, he believed, were detached from ordinary day-to-day life. They were reasons and consequences of another realm that would not unsettle Badr’s life or anyone else’s. All that had happened was that two worlds, the spiritual and the material, had touched each other briefly before moving on, each faithful to its own orbit. It had been a privilege to bend in worship at this particular gathering. (59)

This configuration of the mosque’s effect on Badr is consistent with the representation of the mosque in *Minaret*: while the mosque’s physical condition is at a minimum level—as the narrator tells us that “extensive work was needed and the project was taking too long” (58)—Badr’s spiritual feelings are elevated to a maximum level.

In the second scene at King Farouk Mosque (which takes place toward the end of the story), Badr’s mosque experience is unequivocally the opposite. Rehabilitation works are now concluded, and the mosque appears in a glamorous shape. Badr, who “hurried to catch the inaugural prayer” (291), is shown to have a sentimental attitude that is thoroughly disconnected from any spiritual feeling. The emphasis
becomes then on worldliness, politics, and the spectacular physicality of the mosque. Instead of transcending all physical boundaries toward the “invisible” realm he touches in the previous scene, Badr is pulled back by the physical barriers described in this scene. Not a single word is mentioned (or even hinted) about any spiritual dimension in the whole scene. Similar worldliness associated with the physical mosque is also depicted in Aboulela’s short work “Barbie in the Mosque” (2002a). While staying in the mosque with Aisha along with women and children during the month of Ramadan, the speaker, who is Aboulela herself, is reflecting on some political issues about Muslim women in an inter-cultural context. The scene becomes a means for highlighting intentionally distorted tropes about Muslim women in diaspora. Again, no spiritual feelings or metaphysical experience are reported.

But one might object that Aboulela’s characterization of the mosque is a hyperbolic denial of the significance of any physical dimension. If this is the case (that is, if Aboulela is indeed exaggerating the absence of physicality), her suggestion then becomes like an urgent call alerting the reader to how much materialism has already crippled and distorted spiritual understanding in modern times. Perhaps, this thesis is delivered through the example of the mosque (as a symbol), to restore past Islamic ideals when the spiritual criterion used to supersede material ones. The ‘past’ here means the early Islamic period, the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and the Rightly Guided Caliphs.

Historically, this later statement has a clear validity. In his book, *Rethinking the Mosque in the Modern Muslim Society*, Mohamad Rasdi (2014) presents a detailed study of the history of the mosque and its function in Islamic history. During the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and the next four caliphs, according to Rasdi, “mosques were simple and humble in architectural expression but were utilised for its fullest potential” (2014, 10). Later, however, the mosque became characterized by a more complex form but with less functionality. Rasdi explains that “[t]he reign of the Umayyad saw the mosque becoming more isolated and specialised in purpose” (2014, 10). This means that, after the era of the Rightly Guided Caliphs, the mosque was gradually institutionalized (i.e., made an institution) and became associated with limited ends. The functional development of the mosque continued historically until, in modern times, “[t]he mosque had become an institution that was under a specific department of religious affairs in many nations” (Rasdi 2014, 13 emphasis added). The relationship between physicality and functionality then seems to have historically an inverse proportionality, so when the physical variable becomes prioritized, the functional one is marginalized (or, to put it in mathematical terms, spirituality = 1/physicality). This formula has been emphasized as follows: “when the mosque was objectified to express power, wealth and glory, the declination of its functional significance initiated simultaneously” (Utaberta et al. 2015, 372). By disconnecting the spiritual function of the mosque from any physicality, Aboulela is reversing (though exaggeratedly) these historical changes. In other words, her representation of the mosque appears like an urge to go back to the original function of the mosque, emphasizing its spiritual role in the first place.
Conclusion

To sum up, Najwa’s mosque experience makes her better equipped to cope with the difficulties of her materialistic world. Despite the unrelenting effect of the two models delineated above, Najwa miraculously finds peace now; she attains that lost sense of inner tranquillity and concord that shields her soul against the ongoing, severe turbulence that she fails to handle before her transformation. On the face of it, life has not changed, as the ideologies of capitalism, communism, and perhaps many others’ (not stressed in Minaret) have not ceased to keep their grip on most material details of her life. After Najwa’s transformation, life is not rendered utopian. However, the spiritual capability extended to Najwa through the mosque makes her life vibrant, exciting, and carefree. This formula of conflicting forces (i.e., the external material hardships and the internal spiritual comfort) is encapsulated in the following statement by Najwa: “The skidding and plunging was coming to an end. Slowly, surely I was settling at the bottom. It felt oddly comfortable, painless. It felt like the worst was over. And there, buried below, was the truth” (240, emphasis added). To further emphasize the spiritual function of the mosque, Aboulela is making it functional only when it is stripped of any material aspect.

The mosque’s representation is projected by Aboulela with the same consistency, whereby the mosque’s spiritual power is manifested only when its physicality is marginalized. The way Aboulela seems to insist on not bringing the two dimensions together is meant to create the spiritual shield that can protect figures like Najwa (and Badr) against the sheer materialism of the ideological systems discussed above. Aboulela, therefore, is trying in her fiction to de-institutionalize the mosque in a process that is most visible in disconnecting the physical from the spiritual. The de-institutionalizing process is most stressed in her recurrent scenes where the act of congregational prayer takes place in the open, which recalls in mind one of the main types of the mosque discussed by Rasdi, which is “the mosque without building.”25 The mosque’s representation in Aboulela’s fiction makes use of this concept, as the act of prayer can be performed anywhere,26 and this is rooted in the original meaning of the word mosque, or masjid, which “derives from the Arabic word sajda (prostration), thus defining the mosque as a place of prayer and submission” (Rizvi 2015, 9–10). In this sense, the mosque is not limited to space.

Another important aspect of de-institutionalizing the mosque is Aboulela’s unwillingness to ascribe to it any form of the official hierarchy, with certain individuals having religious titles. Nowhere does Aboulela mention the presence of officially appointed Imams in Minaret, and in Lyrics Alley the Imam is only mentioned in the second scene. The Imam, of course, is necessary, but such a role is not exclusive to certain groups of people. In this regard, Saphic Omer reminds us that “the Prophet (SAW) asserted that his mosque, and every other mosque, is blind to socio-economic rank and status. Mosques belong to everybody. Everybody is equally entitled to them and their services” (2010, 129). In Minaret, most of the people who are active in the mosque are ordinary people who voluntarily do such works without being officially appointed there, like Um Waleed. Nevertheless, this lack of official hierarchy does not mean making this spiritual function a domain that can be politically or ideologically exploited by some people. Aboulela is against such groups, especially extremists. 27 After all, de-institutionalizing means necessarily
dep-politicizing, for the mosque in Aboulela’s fiction has the power to neutralize the prejudicial effects of the political and ideological systems we see in Minaret. Finally, it is perhaps in the light of Aboulela’s fiction that one can understand Alija Izetbegovic’s statement when he said, “It is true that a mosque is built from a given number of stone blocks of definite form and in definite order, from a certain quantity of mortar, wooden beams, and so forth: however, this is not the whole truth about the mosque” (1993, 9).

Indeed, in a world that is heavily limited and burdened by different forms of materialism, the mosque can empower one’s relationship with God and provide the spirituality needed to make such material constructs less effective.

من الأيديولوجيات المادية إلى المسجد: القوة التحديدية للروحانية في رواية ليلي أبو العلا (المدننة)

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الملخص

تتناول هذه الدراسة وظيفة المسجد في أدب ليلي أبو العلا، مركزًا بشكل أساسي على روايتها (المدننة). وتحقيق هذا الهدف، توضح الدراسة أشكال المادية التي تنقل كاهل عالم رواية (المدننة). كما تركز الدراسة على تشغيل شخصية بطء الرواية (نجوى) بين أيديولوجيات مادية متضاربة لا تعطى لنجوى ذاتها. وتبين الدراسة عدم جدوى أي من هذه الأيديولوجيات التي يتم إبطال أثرها على شخصية نجوى تدريجياً عن طريق القوة الروحية التي تتحصل عليها من خلال المسجد. يحدث التحول الروحي لنجوى على مدى فترة طويلة من التأثر—بشكل مقطع—بالتجلبات الروحانية التي من خلالها تدرك البطلة ما تتفوقه من روحانيات مرفوعة في شخصيتها بعمق وتعتبر هذه الروحانيات المهمة كمئة بالأيديولوجيات المادية التي أنتجت بها ضرراً كبيراً وسيطرت على أسلوب حياتها السابق. وتبين الدراسة بشكل كبير على الوظيفة الروحانية للمسجد من خلال الطريق التي تفصل بها أبو العلا روحانيات المسجد عن أي شكل من أشكال المادية، فالمقدمة الروحانية للمسجد تعلو على أي بعد مادي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ليلي أبو العلا؛ المدننة؛ المسجد؛ الروحانية، المادية.
Endnotes

1 The Orientalist tropes challenged by Salih are those discussed mainly by Edward Said (1978). What is new in Aboulela’s fiction, according to Hassan, is the emergence of Islamic discourse that helps continue the “national project” of Salih (2008, 300). Hassan’s analysis can still be contextualized within an East-West cultural encounter. He argues that “Aboulela is preoccupied with migration between North and South, cultural perceptions and stereotypes, and the possibilities of building bridges between former colonizer and colonized” (2008, 298).

2 This view is maintained by Rachael Gilmour in rendering *Minaret* as “an attempt to replace mistranslation with ‘correct’ translation of a spiritual Islam” (2012, 7). The same idea of presenting a true image of Islam is suggested by Shakir Mustafa, who positions Aboulela among other authors with a common aim: “Numerous details in the fiction published by Muslim writers, backed with statements by some writers, indicate a drive to present what they believe is a truer face of Islam” (Mustafa 2009, 282).

3 Roxanne Bibizadeh, for example, posits that Aboulela’s work “participates in generating an alternative discourse which examines and ultimately challenges the prevalent stereotype of the oppressed Muslim woman” (2015, 73). Bibizadeh argues further that “Aboulela complicates the dominant representation of Muslim women in literature by portraying a version of Islamic feminism” (2015, 74).

4 Emily Churilla, for example, posits that it is “in this space [the mosque] that Najwa begins to find her subjectivity, mirrored not in lack as Other, but within the recognition of a community of women” (2011, 41). Similarly, Claire Chambers suggests that, for Najwa and other characters associated with the mosque, “Islam is far less an ideology than a code of ethical behaviour and a central marker of identity in the fragmentary world of migration, asylum and family disintegration” (2011, 183).

5 In trying to show how Aboulela’s female protagonists are empowered by Sufism, Zulfiqar suggests, with a feminist sentiment, that the heroine in *Minaret* finds in the novel’s inner path a way out of the male-controlled, “orthodox” interpretation of Islam.

6 It is true that there are certain scenes where some Londoners appear, but these characters are kept in the background and do not have any important role in the development of the novel’s main plot.

7 It has been suggested that the main characters associated with the mosque in *Minaret* are not politicized: “Najwa, Tamer, and their South Asian, Arab, and white convert friends from the mosque are not interested in politics” (Chambers 2009, 88).

8 Of course, there are those people in London who are not westernized such as Wafaa and Um Waleed, who become part of Najwa’s acquaintances after her spiritual transformation.

9 Citations from Aboulela’s fictional works will be given as page numbers only.

10 Critics have used the term ‘elite’ to describe Najwa’s social status (see Hunter 2013, 9; Gilmour 2012, 7).
Najwa is aware of this fact, as she later reminds Omar of the time when they were “children from hot Khartoum coming to London every summer […] as if they had every right to be there. Money did that. Money gave us rights” (94).

The term ‘capitalist’ has also been used by Geoffrey Nash (2012) in his discussion of Minaret and The Translator: “Fathers and brothers are victims to the intrusion of western capitalism which has undermined a traditional Islamic society with its community-centred faith practice” (Nash 2012, 46–7).

This violence is most visible in the first coup.

Najwa asks Uncle Saleh about the people behind the last coup, and he “said that he had no idea where they came from” (138). Even Anwar’s letter to Najwa in London does not explain what happened.

In all his dialogues with Najwa (in London), Anwar never directs any criticism or accusation to the new government. Rather, he continues to criticize the (capitalist) government before the first coup.

Aboulela affirms that her aim is “demonstrating that many Muslims aren’t interested in politics, and not interested in extremism” (Chambers 2009, 100). This is clearly expressed by Najwa: when Anwar asks her, “What are your own political views?” She replies, “I don't know. I don’t have any” (15).

See for example her talk with Randa over the phone (in London), as Najwa becomes unexpectedly overcome by the same memory (134-5).

In this regard, Geoffrey Nash is right when he posits that Aboulela’s “chief protagonists are women making statements about their faith and about themselves – statements which they presumably could not have made in the same way in Sudan or Egypt” (2012, 45).

In chapter 19, Eva shows Najwa some photographs, telling her how a friend of Najwa’s father used to cheat on his wife. Najwa then asks, “If my father's friend could cheat on his wife, then why wouldn't my father cheat on the Treasury?” (144).

Chambers asserts similarly that “[t]he mosque provides shelter […] it is where Najwa finds her job as a nanny-cum-servant; it provides education, both in the form of religious classes and one-off lectures that stimulate much debate” (2011, 184).

This role of the mosque in solidifying Najwa’s sense of belonging is also stressed by Chambers (2011) and Churilla (2011). See note 4 above.

The lecture is basically about “the signs preceding the Day of Judgement” (107).

The narrator says, “The mosque was packed and Badr could not make his way to the front rows, which were reserved for Sudanese government representatives and high-ranking officials” (292).

The speaker is reflecting on how the image of Muslims is distorted in western media: “Outside they speak in a different way. Enter a newsagent, pick up a paper, pick up The Times and read: It is ironic that most British converts to Islam are women, given the widespread view in the West that Islam treats women poorly” (Aboulela 2002a, 2).
25 Rasdi distinguishes between five types of mosques: “These mosques can be classified as the Sacred Mosque, the universal mosque, the tribal mosque, the memorial mosque, and the mosque without a building.” (2014, 76)

26 Rasdi reminds us that “[p]rayer can be performed at any clean place except those prohibited by the Prophet, namely at the graveyard, filthy dump site or at a place for answering the call of nature” (2014, 93).

27 In one of her interviews, Aboulela affirms that (while speaking about the concept of individualism) “lack of authority can [...] cause problems in that certain groups abuse their freedom to interpret the Qur’an and shariah in ways which bolster their own agendas or political aims” (Rashid 2012, 621).

References


