

## “Halal fiction” and the limits of postsecularism

Morey, Peter

DOI:

[10.1177/0021989416689295](https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989416689295)

*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Morey, P 2017, “Halal fiction” and the limits of postsecularism: Criticism, critique, and the Muslim in Leila Aboulela’s *Minaret*, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989416689295>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

Checked for eligibility: 09/11/2017

© The Author(s) 2017

<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0021989416689295>

**General rights**

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of ‘fair dealing’ under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

**Take down policy**

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact [UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk](mailto:UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk) providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.

**‘Halal fiction’ and the limits of postsecularism: Criticism, critique and the Muslim in  
Leila Aboulela’s *Minaret***

**Peter Morey (University of East London, UK)**

**Abstract**

This paper examines Leila Aboulela’s 2005 novel *Minaret*, considering the extent to which it can be seen as an example of a postsecular text. The work has been praised by some as one of the most cogent attempts to communicate a life of Islamic faith in the English language novel form. Others have expressed concern about what they perceive as its apparent endorsement of submissiveness and a secondary status for women, along with its silence on some of the more thorny political issues facing Islam in the modern world. I argue that both these readings are shaped by the current ‘market’ for Muslim novels which places on such texts the onus of being ‘authentically representative’. Moreover, while apparently underwriting claims to authenticity, Aboulela’s technique of unvarnished realism requires of the reader the kind of suspension of disbelief in the metaphysical that appears to run contrary to the secular trajectory of the English literary novel in the last three hundred years.

I take issue with binarist versions of the postsecular thesis that equate the post-Enlightenment West with relentless desecralisation and the ‘Islamic world’ with a persistent collectivist and spiritual outlook, and suggest that we pay more attention to fundamental narrative elements which recur across the supposed West/East divide. Historically simplistic understandings of the secularisation of culture – followed in the last few years by a postsecular turn – misrepresent the actual evolution of the novel. The ‘religious’ persists, albeit transmuted into symbolic schema and themes of material or emotional redemption. I end by arguing for the renewed relevance of the kind of analysis of literary ‘archetypes’ suggested by Northrop Frye, albeit disentangled from its specifically Christian resonances

and infused by more attention to cultural cross-pollination. It is *this* type of approach that seems more accurately to account for the peculiarities of Aboulela's fiction.

### **Keywords**

Leila Aboulela, *Minaret*, Islam, postsecular, Talal Asad, Saba Mahmood, Northrop Frye, the novel, realism

The Sudanese diaspora writer Leila Aboulela's debut novel *The Translator* was published to critical praise in 1999, with Britain's *Muslim News* announcing that it was 'the first halal [...] novel written in English', on account of its foregrounding of issues of Islamic faith in the life and choices of its central protagonists (Abbas, 2014: 87). Since then Aboulela has developed a reputation as a writer for whom the imperatives of belief are at the centre of her work. In this essay I wish to consider how her second novel *Minaret* (2005) offers a partial critique of that normative materialist and secularist individualism against which religious faith – and in particular proactive Islamic faith – is viewed as peculiar, aberrant and incomprehensible. At the same time, *Minaret* is effectively compromised to the extent that it attempts to conciliate what might be called 'anthropological' readings of Muslim writing, which see texts by an avowedly religious subject as offering insights into the mind of the 'other'. I will argue that Aboulela's novel ~~operates takes its place~~ in what might be termed a critical market for interpreting the Muslim writer that takes its cue from prevailing orthodoxies about how secular modernity is the defining feature of a West that has evolved beyond the irrational consolations of religion. We need to think about how these categories operate, how they are circulated in a world eager for answers to 'the Muslim problem', and – most crucially – what they leave out.

Aboulela is cannily aware of the governing critical paradigms through which her writing is likely to be received and judged: those of culturalist politics and postcolonialism. Geoffrey Nash quotes a 2007 interview in which Aboulela acknowledged that, “in a secular climate, faith is seen as either part of culture/tradition or it is seen as political [...] Muslims need, for practical purposes, to talk in this [...] language” (Nash, 2012: 120). In Nash’s view, ‘Rather than conform to the stale Orientalist discourse of much western writing on Islam, fictional or otherwise, Aboulela adopts a subtle transgressive discourse which engages with Orientalist and postcolonial tropes in such a way as to project herself [...] as a representative for Islam’ (2012: 45). While this is an accurate description of the reading Aboulela’s work invites, the tactic of adopting the language and concerns of prevailing discourses may yield ambiguous results, framing her fiction as the ‘answer’ to a question posed by – and in the terms of – a non-Muslim, curious but also possibly hostile audience. Moreover, the matter of her representative status raises other questions, both about the possibility of one émigré Sudanese writer being *able* to effectively represent the enormous panoply of Muslim regional and doctrinal variants, and about the value and co-optability of representativeness itself. This is because, in fiction as elsewhere, the terms of such representativeness are always ultimately determined by operations of power, discursive frames, which limit how and what will be recognised as representatively Muslim (Morey and Yaqin, 2011: 79-111).

Postsecularism, as a catch-all term for a series of critical positions that question the normative supremacy of secular perspectives on the world, has gained an increasingly high profile in recent years, particularly since the 9/11 attacks and the need to reappraise the nature of faith as a driver for political action in the world. It is a controversial term for a multifaceted, even contradictory, set of ideas, being understood variously as: the return of public religious group feeling; a postcolonial backlash against Enlightenment rationalism and

its secular assumptions; an extension of the relativising tendencies of anti-foundationalist theoretical schools; or a self-critical tendency within the Enlightenment's own tradition of questioning. Postsecularism has been made to encompass those critics, such as Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood, who might otherwise be defined as anti-secularist: opposing the universalist assertions of the 'secularisation thesis' by which modernity is understood in terms of the expulsion of religion from the public realm; as well as including viewpoints, drawing on contemporary critical theory, which seek to destabilise or deconstruct the binaries of religious and secular (see, in particular, Asad, 1993, 2003; see also Mahmood, 2005). These perspectives have helped shape the postsecular as a critical discourse that reinstates religious conviction in the modern world against secularist charges of its redundancy. As such the postsecular provides one way to understand the tenor of Aboulela's devout fiction.<sup>1</sup>

However, recent attacks on Aboulela by critics such as Sadia Abbas and Wail Hassan have focussed on the pious passivity displayed by *Minaret's* protagonist Najwa, and the way the novel as a whole appears to endorse types of female renunciation and doctrinal orthodoxy favoured by the stricter Salafi theology currently gaining ground in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia which some see as 'fundamentalist' (Abbas, 2014; Hassan, 2008). They cite approving comments made by the protagonist about shariah punishments and her desire to subjugate herself to protective males. Abbas sees in this echoes of Saba Mahmood's influential analysis of those orthodox Muslim women in Egypt's *da'wa* movement, for whom piety 'is performative, behavioural and yet creative of subjectivity', but which Abbas sees as conceding too much to restrictive conservative gender norms (Abbas, 2014: 62). Najwa's choice to renounce the secular satisfactions of romantic love and material independence in favour of subordination to religious norms is not only a position that chooses submission over willed action in the world, it is also dismissive of other modes of agency such as feminism and Marxism, whose materialist focus dooms them as forever unsatisfactory to the woman of

faith. Hassan sees Najwa's choice as a complete disavowal of freedom and agency that plays into the hands of right-wing interpretations of Islam (2008: 313).

However, from a formal perspective, I prefer to attribute the peculiar tensions engendered by aspects of *Minaret* to two sources: a discomfort for the reader in the mismatch between our expectations of the genres of which the novel partakes – the Bildungsroman and the romance – and the plot resolution; and the novel's refusal to take on the challenge of finding an alternative to prosaic realism as a vehicle for espousing transcendental belief. In the western tradition, the Bildungsroman has usually been read in relation to active self-realisation, through material or social integration and reward. The development of the self is commensurate with a 'coming in' to the bosom of society in the classic realist novel. Conversely, within literary modernism these comforts may ultimately be rejected, but they are rejected by the heroic will of agents who prefer isolation or even death to social conformity. In the romance, the main narrative energies are directed towards emotional and erotic fulfilment. A novel such as *Minaret* that deliberately rejects both models, without any compensatory material advancement or sense of secular gender solidarity, seems to transgress some of the basic 'rules' of literature as it is understood to have developed.

In other words, *Minaret* reveals the difficulty of attempting to move the secular individualist form of the novel back to its spiritual roots: to fill an art form etched by three hundred years of secular individualism with a sense of God as a real presence. The difficulty of the task is reflected in the novel's interpretative crises and challenges, and in the collision between its spiritual agenda and the banality of its chosen form. Even so, close analysis of some of the novel's structuring themes and its overall shape reveals that it inherits traits characteristic of much older forms of storytelling, having their origins in a worldview with points of commonality between Islam and the Judeo-Christian tradition.

\*\*\*

*Minaret* tells the story of Najwa's fall from the elite social strata in 1980s Sudan, the loss of her family, her lonely exile as a nanny to a rich Muslim family in London, the tentative romance she begins with the son of the family, leading to her dismissal, and the gradual rediscovery of her Islamic faith. The story is narrated in straightforward prose and in sections that alternate between her past life in Khartoum and present-time predicament in London. We see the blinkered complacency of her pampered youth suddenly shattered by a coup that deposes the regime her father serves, at the same time exposing his and the regime's corruption.

Yet the novel's concern is clearly not with the national politics of Sudan, but with Najwa's gradual awakening from the false, superficial values that have characterised her thinking. It is a long journey to enlightenment, with many a snare along the way: she embarks on an affair with the arrogant, unfeeling Marxist activist Anwar, and her drug-dealing brother Omar ends up in prison. Yet there are also beacons too, like the patient female preacher Wafaa and the teacher Um Waleed, who gently lead her back into the path of Islam, along with a supportive network of women at the mosque. Above all, there is Tamer, who becomes her lover, the only male in the St John's Wood household where she works. Tamer has a religious conviction that is presented as preferable to the shallow selfishness of others in his family. Yet Najwa is always aware of the immaturity of her much younger lover, manifest in some of his more uncompromising statements and, ultimately, his infatuation with her. Their romance is broken off at the end through the intervention of Tamer's mother who pays Najwa money to stop seeing him. For Najwa, her spiritual quest and the development of a pious religious identity mark the culmination of a process of 'return' to Islam, even as her family's travails have led her far away from her birthplace in Khartoum.

As her faith grows, Islam for Najwa becomes consolation and explanation, but also a mode of punishment. The book appears to advocate a necessary purging involved in gaining true piety, with the refrain ‘wash my sins with ice’ encapsulating Najwa’s mindset (2005: 135, 159). Islam in *Minaret* is about deferred rewards, bringing human will into line with divine requirements, and scriptural literalism. Najwa comments on how she lives to bury her desires, not indulge them, and she is exhorted by a friend to ‘think of all the reward from Allah you’re getting’ (2005: 105). If anything, her young suitor Tamer is even more devout, being committed to a literal belief in Qur’anic descriptions of the Day of Judgement and other aspects of doctrine, and attributing his sister Lamyia’s haughty cruelty to a lack of religiosity. Tamer returns from a Ramadan retreat with ‘his eyes clear and shining, as if he could see other things’ (2005: 189), burns to undertake hajj, and proceeds to insist on Islamic observances such as the hijab and halal food. However, although these are all signs of laudable faith, there is a sense that Tamer’s dogmatism is part of his immaturity. When he quarrels with Lamyia we are told that his ‘rebellion is half-formed, half-baked, it lacks a focus and a goal’ (2005: 220). His act of kissing Najwa can be read as a burst of youthful impulse, and when she loses her job after their liaison is discovered Tamer lashes out against his family, leading her to observe that ‘[h]e is like someone else, a common rebellious teenager’ (2005: 254).

Indeed, the central Najwa-Tamer relationship is one that bears the hallmarks of the romance form, while at the same time subtly transvaluing and diverting it. The search for love is a central theme of the book. However, on the face of it a distinction is drawn between sexual love and spiritual love, or love for the Prophet. Najwa’s sexual consummation with Anwar leaves her feeling fragile and soiled. By contrast, Tamer shares her religious priorities. Yet, it is noticeable that he operates to reconcile the spiritual and the sensual – the latter still a powerful force in Najwa’s make-up. There is much emphasis on touch in both relationships.



Najwa experiences an acute physical response to both men – even via simple physical proximity. Tamer’s first kiss immediately follows the religious outrage he and Najwa share over a party guest’s sacrilegious use of the hijab in an impromptu striptease; and their first encounter in the lobby of the St John’s Wood apartment has an erotic edge which is nonetheless couched in religious terms – a breathless Najwa feels she can almost ‘smell Paradise’ on him (2005: 3). Thus, the usual romance dynamics are set in play. What differs in *Minaret* is that they are figured through Islamic ideals and attendant imagery. This subtly prepares us to accept – or at least expect – that the same ideals will determine valorised characters’ choices even if that means a rejection of the usual love-story resolution.

The self-effacing qualities that lead to this result are prominent in Najwa throughout the story. Her valorised decisions all tend towards the consolidation or preservation of family rather than towards the individual fulfilment expected of a novelistic protagonist. Losing her own family makes her acutely aware of the value of kinship support networks and she gives up Tamer partly to stop him ‘sinning’ against his mother through disobedience, and with the aim of keeping his family together. Najwa’s narrating voice rationalises her acceptance of the bribe in terms of releasing her young lover back to his mother, and on the final page, half-dreaming, she wonders whether she really loved him at all.

This tension between the individual and the collective recurs in the question of how Islam relates to identity. At one point, Tamer and Najwa directly discuss their sense of identity. Rejecting any notion of being western, they both settle on ‘Muslim’ as the identity marker they are most comfortable with – this in contrast to Lamya whom Tamer believes considers herself Arab (2005: 110). This is a crucial distinction and one remarked upon in Saba Mahmood’s analysis of Egyptian Muslim women, when she notes the western critical tendency to read Islamist movements as ‘a recoding of [Arab] nationalist sentiment in religious idioms’ (2005: 118). Both Mahmood and Aboulela reject the secularist reading as

an inaccurate understanding of the role of Islam as an all-encompassing internationalist solidarity; in *Minaret* Najwa remarks on the many nations represented in the weekly Qur'an classes she attends at her local mosque. In pitting the religious against the national, and the personal against the political, the novel clearly seeks to endorse the former in each case.

The real politics of the book lie in the distinction between believers – such as Najwa, Tamer and the women at the mosque – and unbelievers like Omar, Anwar and Lamya. The former are honest, open, spiritually questing and religiously observant. The latter are feckless, insensitive, materialistic and selfish. While the sacred and profane are always proximate, prone to bleed into one another if vigilance is not maintained, Najwa's transformation is achieved through a humility that, when rerouted via religious faith, finally results in acceptance and peace. It is *not* the product of self-assertion or personal ambition.

Personal happiness and fulfilment – the goal of the classic realist novel – is here less significant than the satisfaction to be derived from the proper performance of Islamic faith.

As such, Najwa could be argued to practise what Saba Mahmood, in another context, has called a politics of piety. In this view, self-realisation, which in the liberal tradition is linked to individual autonomy and willed action, is instead located in and through dutiful religious behaviour. Mahmood draws on the work of Talal Asad, for whom western definitions of 'agency' emphasise autonomy and what he calls 'history making' through public participation to, in some way, 'create the future' (Asad, 1993: 19). Asad points out that agency has historically and culturally different meanings. When the West looks at the Muslim woman – often veiled and apparently subservient – it is as a passive victim against which the assertive, public western woman can be juxtaposed. He points out that 'the right of the individual to the pursuit of happiness and self-creation, a doctrine easily assimilable by secular nationalist thought, is countered by Islamists (as in classical Islamic theology) by the duty of the Muslim to worship God as laid down in the *sharia*' (2003: 198).

Mahmood extends this exploration of countervailing types of female agency in *The Politics of Piety*, her anthropological study of religious practice and identity formation among women involved in Cairo's *da'wa* or mosque movement (2005).<sup>2</sup> According to Mahmood, the faithful subject is *produced* through the performance of pious behaviour and ritual, rather than such behaviour and ritual symbolising an inward state of faith. She goes on to oppose the Kantian model of ethics, based on the exercise of reason, with an older Aristotelian tradition in which 'morality was both realized through, and manifest in, outward behavioural forms' (2005: 25). This also has implications for the idea of freedom which, in the Islamic tradition Mahmood invokes, is actually realised by submission to forms of religious authority, rather than the more familiar Enlightenment idea of struggle against restraining traditions which must be overcome. Autonomy, figured as individual choice and free will, is seen by Mahmood as part of the liberal tradition particularly dear to western feminists, who frequently fail to see the choice of female Islamic piety as genuine or legitimate. Mahmood points out that 'illiberal' choices can be autonomous too: not simply imposed by oppressive patriarchy. In this view, the pious subject comes into being through bodily acts such as veiling, avoiding eye contact with men, and the scrupulous performance of prescribed domestic duties. Such things 'are the critical markers of piety, as well as the ineluctable means by which one trains oneself to be pious' (2005: 158).

A similar idea of piety through submission animates *Minaret*. In addition to donning the hijab and becoming more regular in her prayers and mosque attendance, Najwa indulges in elaborate fantasies of submission to protective males, at one point even wishing herself a concubine in an *Arabian Nights*-type world, 'with lifelong security and a sense of belonging' (2005: 215). If all novels tend to be about personal transformation in some form or another, in *Minaret* the agent of transformation is different: good religious observance and

submission, rather than weathering life's vicissitudes and winning through to a new place *in the world*.

Nowhere is this existential shift more clearly evident than in the mosque, which operates for Najwa as a place of safety and respite. Here she learns the true meaning of the ummah, through the international cast of worshippers, while the Qur'an classes she attends reshape her moral sense. At one point, Najwa describes how, in these classes, 'I learn to pronounce the letters correctly, when to blur two letters together, when to pronounce the n in a nasal way, for how many beats to prolong a certain letter. This concentration on technique soothes me; it makes me forget everything around me' (2005: 78-79). The emphasis on performance, technique and ritual here is not simply about liturgical consolation or the concentration required to master Qur'anic Arabic. Rather, it draws our attention to an embodied engagement with textual material quite different from hermeneutic protocols of reading that are concerned with extracting meaning.

Although the implications of this ritualistic approach are not followed through fully, they are of a piece with the broader question of reading people as well as texts. Mahmood rejects the tendency in western discourses to read female modes of dress and behaviour in Islam as somehow symbolising identity. In her study of the mosque movement she insists that bodily practice should not be read as politically symbolic, but rather that it is 'the terrain upon which the topography of a subject comes to be mapped' (2005: 121). Ritualised behaviour *constitutes* the pious self. It does not *symbolise* it. This is part of Mahmood's modification of Judith Butler's notion of performativity, wherein resistance can be articulated by exaggerated or parodic performance of, for instance, gender norms (see Butler, 1999). For Mahmood's mosque women, performance is not about subverting norms, but upholding them. Moreover, language-based approaches such as semiotics miss the point for Mahmood because performance is intrinsic to the creation of identity, not an expression of it.

This supposed failure to distinguish between the lived and the symbolic is at the heart of Asad and Mahmood's postsecular challenge to literature and literary criticism too. For the religious subject, the 'image' – Mahmood prefers the word 'icon' – is intrinsic to a sense of self, not simply a sign to be read semiotically. According to Enlightenment modernity, which follows the Protestant line of development, religious signs are not embodiments of the divine but instead stand in for it. Since the Muslim view of images considered sacred is more intrinsic this leads to what the West considers 'improper reading practices' when it comes to matters such as the 2006 Danish cartoon controversy, where international Muslim outrage at representations of their Prophet was depicted as rampant (and violent) misreading (Mahmood, 2013: 67). The postsecularist line traces this stark difference of interpretation back to the principle of separation between the subject and the object, the signifier and the signified, and Kant's insistence on the pre-eminence of reason in judgement. Drawing a distinction between critical reading, which relies on the notion of subject/-object distance, and what he terms 'uncritical reading' – that rapt, devotional mode of reading which aims to ingest rather than analyse – Michael Warner notes that the western tradition is comfortable with 'the normative ideals of our own critical activity', but struggles to assimilate reading practices 'that cultivate piety' (2004: 33).

The move from pious to critical reading is central to our understanding of the development of the novel form in the Enlightenment era. It seems to go along with the shift from the intensive, repeated reading of religious and devotional texts to that extensive reading characteristic of the new market for fiction in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. However, I wish to argue that this distinction is sometimes overstated and can be misleading. Asad has persuasively described the distinctions between the western critical tradition that, in the nineteenth century, treated even the Bible as a literary text to be historicised and decoded, and an Islamic tradition which operates from the firm conviction

that the Qur'an is divinely revealed. He has also made the point that the so-called post-Romantic 'disenchantment' of myth – that which paved the way for the realist novel – has caused the 'inspired' author to take over the status of all-powerful creator, just as culture itself has taken up the space of the sacred previously occupied by religion (1993: 287; 2003: 9-14, 44). This is all true as a description of the development of a dominant mode of literary criticism and has implications for our reading of *Aboulela* which I will explore below. However, when put into practice by the postsecularists it fails adequately to distinguish between criticism, critique and actual literary practice.

While criticism is a practice – something we *do* to texts and societies – Judith Butler defines 'critique' as 'an inquiry into the conditions of possibility that make judgement possible' (2013: 109). If, as Asad suggests, secular critique has become a modern theology serviced by the academic Humanities and especially literary criticism, this would in part explain the difficulty criticism has in dealing with a novel such as *Minaret*, where the attitude to religious orthodoxy is accepting and not questioning, and where doctrine is embodied in the pious subject herself and not played out and tested in the plot (Asad, 2013: 48). However, the postsecularists leave this problematic unresolved, merely pointing to the conflict between worldviews. In this view literature itself becomes part of the problem, effectively a tool in the clash of civilisations.

If this were all there was to say then we could, by extension, suggest that Leila Aboulela is wasting her time writing novels. Her attempts to articulate an experience unrecognisable in the available terms of secular literary critique would be doomed to failure from the start. Thankfully, this need not be the case. Although we should still be wary of the pitfalls of reading practices that may foreclose certain understandings of experience, we can nonetheless return to questions of form, both to note those obstacles to conveying faith and to register the immanent means by which the novel as a form is always already marked by the

shape, idioms and imagery of religion. I begin with the canonical account of the secularisation thesis and its link to the rise of realism, before suggesting – via the work of Northrop Frye – that the spiritual/ secular distinction is at the very least overstated in accounts of literary fiction.

\*\*\*

Aboulela employs a flat, direct narrative style, attuned to the generally mundane nature of existence. However, she is at the same time trying to persuade us of the reality of Najwa's spiritual awakening and get us to accept her understanding of providential intervention. In the absence of bringing in God himself as a character who can be represented and questioned – something which would be blasphemous and not at all 'halal', as Abbas has pointed out – we are simply expected to accept Najwa's conclusions about the divine guiding hand leading her back to a righteous path (Abbas, 2014: 72-96). As such, we might say there is a mismatch between the novel's form and its putative message.

This limitation is also reflected in the short shrift given to those other explanatory narratives – such as female self-determination or Marxism – embodied by other characters. The first-person narrative focalisation through Najwa avoids or rejects them out of hand. Her narrow point of view is deemed not to require any mimetic backup through the usual literary devices such as irony or gradations of authority among the texts' voices. Hassan argues that, 'in Aboulela's episteme of faith, there is neither room nor use for irony. In matters of faith, the faithful lack a sense of irony, because irony identifies a discrepancy or a lack that diminishes the status of its object. By contrast, faith elevates and exalts (2008: 311). This is a tempting line, but one that does not stand close scrutiny. Aboulela's novels are actually always worrying away at the fact that the faithful are constantly being frustrated – personally

or in terms of their proselytising mission – by the resistance of the unfaithful in refusing to yield to their viewpoint. As such, lack and imperfection are at the heart of her books: the lack engendered in living in a world that is less than perfect and that has not been brought into conformity with God’s law. In view of this, irony’s absence is a *stylistic choice*, not – as Hassan implies – an organic expression of a spiritual outlook. Irony *could* be employed at the expense of a number of targets in *Minaret* (Marxists, hypocrites, secularists). The fact that it is not appears to be a sign of Aboulela’s discomfort with a meaningful polyphony: one that would necessarily give more of a voice and historical rationale to such alternative perspectives. If no persuasive dissenting views are articulated it is then unnecessary to differentiate between them – something that irony assists with. The same first-person narrative voice that guarantees the novel’s authentic feel also excludes any contending discourses. This contributes to the rather flat, ‘take it or leave it’ nature of Aboulela’s account of God’s reappearance in Najwa’s life. Prosaic realism thus arguably hampers readerly identification, enforcing a distinction between those for whom the necessary suspension of disbelief required by all literature extends only to the limits of the empirically credible, and those willing to go along with an internally imposed schema wherein God is effectively both authority and author of the outcome.

The challenge of producing a religious novel may appear, on the face of it, to be simply a matter of writing sympathetically about religious characters and perspectives. However, in the western (and specifically English) novelistic and critical tradition – within which postcolonialism occupies an important but contested space – one must contend with what is often taken to be the three-hundred-year-old drift away from spirituality and faith towards a materialist working out of narrative plot and human choices.<sup>3</sup> As many critics have shown, the English novel begins in large measure from the Puritan spiritual autobiography, the work of Bunyan being the most familiar example today. However, because of the clearly



allegorical and other-worldly focus of a text such as *The Pilgrim's Progress*, classical accounts of the rise of the novel, such as that by Ian Watt, tend to exclude this type of writing as not displaying enough of what Watt calls 'formal realism': a worldly particularity of place, time and character, reflecting Cartesian and Lockean ideas of reason and the self (Watt, 2000: 9-34). In this account, the breakthrough text that combines spiritual and particularist tendencies in just the right measure to be 'a novel' is Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). Defoe's shipwreck story famously begins by following the Prodigal sin-repentance-redemption model of the spiritual autobiography, but soon loses it in describing the physical travails and material rewards of its hero, Robinson, as he works hard and escapes the island to find he is rich. As Leopold Damrosch puts it, in the end *Robinson Crusoe* 'exalts autonomy instead of submission'. It 'reflects the progressive desacralising of the world that was implicit in Protestantism' (Damrosch, 1994: 374, 379). The story of the English novel for the next two hundred-plus years is supposedly about the increasing marginalisation of religion – even when Victorian authors paid lip-service to it – and, *crucially*, the playing out of moral questions on the level of character and event. God does not intervene directly, and where the guiding hand of Providence is seen it tends to be equally explicable in terms of coincidence or, in other cases, heavy-handed omniscient meddling by the author.

However, I would suggest that this view is highly partial and that the structuring principles of the religious narrative do not actually disappear but are instead absorbed into the themes, idioms and plot paradigms of the novel, and continue to be evident to this day. For instance, the novel's ongoing concern with appropriate ethical behaviour has its origins in the religious roots of narrative. Significantly, even as agnostic an author as George Eliot in the mid-nineteenth century was primarily concerned with authority and right behaviour – albeit in a world without God – to such an extent that Comtean positivism blends with Feuerbach's so-called religion of humanity to make kinds of redemption central to novels such as *Adam*

*Bede, Middlemarch* and *Silas Marner* (Ashton, 1983: 11, 51).<sup>4</sup> That least ‘respectable’ of novelists, D. H. Lawrence, likewise uses human relations – albeit physical – to construct a new morality and explore the possibility of redemption from the atrophying effects of modernity. And this is to say nothing of those Catholic novelists, such as Graham Greene, for whom questions of ethical behaviour are played out in the ‘real world’ of war, espionage, gangsters and totalitarianism, but where his believing protagonists face the rather more pressing and unavoidable threat of eternal damnation.

The postsecularists are on more solid ground in acknowledging that ‘the religious and the secular are co-constitutive, indelibly intertwined, each structuring and suffusing the sphere of the other’ (Brown et al., 2013: x).<sup>5</sup> In the case of Abbas and Mahmood, however, this insight comes to be less important than enumerating the inadequacies of secularism in its dealings with religion. Were we to explore it further, and apply it to a literary text such as *Minaret*, we would see that a number of the book’s motifs and assumptions make a broad appeal to deep structures of feeling that go beyond a supposed western/ Islamic divide.

One way of apprehending this appeal is to revisit the work of Northrop Frye, the distinguished twentieth-century Canadian critic famous for his development of archetypal criticism. Frye’s career is informed by a sense of the persistence of recurring formulas in western literature in the repeated metaphors and plot devices of canonical texts. Drawing on Vico and Blake, Frye recognises that literary structures develop from ancient poetic and mythological archetypes and share some of their formal preoccupations and qualities. In particular, he identifies the Bible as the source of the mythological framework for western literature (see in particular Frye, 1957, 1982, 1976). This explicitly Christian heritage might make Frye seem an unlikely filter through which to approach Leila Aboulela’s avowedly Islamic text.<sup>6</sup> However, Frye’s general points about mythological structures, as well as some of the formal features he identifies, serve to open a different way of looking at *Minaret*, one

that acknowledges continuities between Christian, Islamic and secular narrative paradigms. Of particular interest is the notion of a ‘mythological universe’, which Frye calls, ‘a vision of reality in terms of human concerns, hopes and anxieties’ (1976: 14). Such a vision is fed, and takes its shape, from the narrative body of religious and historical revelation through which a society comes to understand itself.

According to Frye, the mythological universe has two aspects:

In one aspect it is the verbal part of man’s own creation, what I call a secular scripture [...] The other is, traditionally, a revelation given to man by God or other powers beyond himself [...] Somehow or other, the created scripture and the revealed scripture [...] have to keep fighting each other, like Jacob and the angel, and it is through the maintaining of this struggle, the suspension of belief between the spiritually real and the humanly imaginative, that our own mental evolution grows. (1976: 60-61)

This is a good description of what we might call the persistence of religion in the novel form, something that helps to make *Minaret* recognisable and comprehensible in terms of western narrative traditions. The persistence of religion is also apparent when Frye identifies motifs of descent and ascent, falling and rising again, as characteristic of the romance narrative archetype. These take the form of descents into the underworld in classical tradition, and of falls from, and ascents to, a state of grace in religious narratives. The same idea, of falling and then being lifted up, is to be found in both Christian and Islamic traditions and is also prevalent in *Minaret* where Najwa’s life after her family’s fall in the coup is marked by a descent in status. The opening lines of the novel tell us: ‘I’ve come down in the world, I’ve slid to a place where the ceiling is low and there isn’t much room to move’ (2005: 1). Reflecting on her string of menial jobs, Najwa remarks: ‘The skidding and plunging was coming to an end. Slowly, surely, I was settling at the bottom’ (2005: 240). Her London working life as a cleaner and the nanny to rich clients is punctuated by trips up and down

elevators and escalators – she bumps into Tamer ‘on the landing’ (2005: 100). And she reflects at one point on the Qur’anic verses from ‘The Heights’: ‘The Heights are a mountain that stands between Paradise and Hell. These men are stuck in the middle, desiring Paradise and fearing Hell, able to see both’ (Sura Al-Araf (The Heights) 7: 1-206).<sup>7</sup> Overall, the narrative describes a slow climb back up, not to a life of luxury, but to the far more valuable reward of a Godly one.

On the other hand, Frye’s model makes clear that the authority of mythological systems is based on their endorsement by a situated tradition: ‘Belief, I am saying, is essentially a form of attachment to a community: in other words belief is also primarily social in reference’ (1976: 171). This encapsulates the challenge for Aboulela as a diasporic subject and a Muslim addressing an audience and a literary community most of whom will not share her beliefs. She is attempting to articulate a mythic tradition perceived to be different to that of its recipients. In fact, as I have shown here, commonalities of narrative structure, having their origins in religious and mythic sources that do not obey such boundaries, are at least as significant as cultural differences. However, it is precisely the anthropological desire for a ‘different’ spokesperson, an authentic ‘other’; who will take us inside the devout Muslim’s experiences – a mode of reading with which Aboulela chooses deliberately to conciliate – that will result in such commonalities being downplayed or overlooked.

The controversial ending, where Najwa accepts a payment from Tamer’s mother to give him up – along with the avowedly religious tenor of the novel’s valorised viewpoints – may prove disquieting for readers steeped in the tradition of secular romance with its normative expectations. The presence of monetary exchange – in effect a bribe – in parting the two lovers, stands in striking contravention of what would ordinarily be considered a satisfactory romance resolution. The news that she will use the money to pay for a pilgrimage to Mecca, while consistent with her burgeoning spiritual sense, denies the reader the

consolation either of ‘true romantic love’ or enhanced social agency. (It is rather as if Jane Eyre, at the end of that novel, had thrown up the hope of a reunion with Rochester to follow the missionary St John Rivers in ministering to the heathen hordes of India.) That it jars as a denouement is testimony to a kind of generic idealism in the response to romance fiction, where a certain plotment and narrative trajectory are expected automatically to result in a particular kind of outcome.

In effect, Najwa’s decision cements a communalist (rather than a communitarian) or individualist resolution. A communitarian outcome would result in social (re)integration, as in the marriage resolution much favoured in nineteenth-century fiction. An individualist one would look more like the typical modernist ending as famously described by Raymond Williams, involving ‘a man [sic] going away on his own, having extricated himself from a dominating situation and found himself in so doing’ (Williams, 1961: 313). By contrast *Minaret*’s conclusion is exclusive and communalist in that it chooses to valorise one particular group – the Islamically devout and observant – against a distinct other group – the profane and the unbelievers – rather than recycle humanism’s usual accommodation with an inclusive set of moral abstractions enshrined in the valorised characters. To that extent, the novel feels dogmatic not, as is the case in most literary fiction, pragmatic. Of course, Najwa *does* develop and gain self-knowledge and confidence throughout the novel. Her judgements are really made questionable only by the normalised course of the secular romance. Indeed, one might say that in asking awkward questions of an assumed reader’s imaginative priorities and expectations, *Minaret* destabilises the tacit assumptions of that mindset in a way that could be deemed postsecular. However, as I have tried to show, it does so through the use of narrative tropes that have cross-cultural resonances, and which, far from re-emerging as ‘postsecular’, actually never went away.

## References

- Abbas S (2014) *At Freedom's Limit: Islam and the Postcolonial Predicament*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Aboulela L (2005) *Minaret*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Alkbari SC and Mallette K (eds) (2013) *A Sea of Languages: Rethinking the Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Asad T (1993) *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Asad T (2003) *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam and Modernity*. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press.
- Asad T (2013) Free speech, blasphemy and secular criticism. In: Asad T, Brown W, Butler J, Mahmood S (eds), *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury and Free Speech*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Ashton R (1983) *George Eliot*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Awn PJ (1983) *Satan's Tragedy and Redemption: Iblis in Sufi Psychology*. Leiden: E.J. Brill.
- [Bradley A and Tate A \(2010\) \*The New Atheist Novel: Fiction, Philosophy and Polemic after 9/11\*. London and New York: Continuum.](#)
- Brown W, Butler J, Mahmood S (2013) Preface. In: Asad T, Brown W, Butler J, Mahmood S (eds) *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury and Free Speech*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Butler J (1999) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. 2nd edn. New York: Routledge.
- Butler J (2013) The sensibility of critique: Response to Asad and Mahmood. In: Asad T, Brown W, Butler J, Mahmood S (eds) *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury and Free Speech*. New York: Fordham University Press.

- Damrosch L (2004) Myth and Fiction in *Robinson Crusoe*. In: Shinagel M (ed.) *Robinson Crusoe*. New York and London: W. W. Norton and Co.
- Frye, N (1957) *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Frye N (1976) *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Frye N (1982) *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*. Orlando FL: Harvest Books.
- Hassan WS (2008) Leila Aboulela and the ideology of Muslim immigrant fiction. *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 41(2/3), Spring-Summer: 298-319.
- Kaufmann M (2009) Locating the postsecular. *Religion and Literature*, 41(3), Autumn: 68-73.
- Mahmood S (2005) *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Mahmood S (2013) Religious reason and secular affect: An incommensurable divide? In: Asad T, Brown W, Butler J, Mahmood S (eds) *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury and Free Speech*, New York: Fordham University Press.
- Menocal MR (1987) *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History: A Forgotten Heritage*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Morey P and Yaqin A (2011) *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation after 9/11*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Nash G (2012) *Writing Muslim Identity*. London and New York: Continuum.
- Said EW (2003) *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Warner M (2004) Uncritical reading. In: Jane Gallop (ed.) *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical*. New York and London: Routledge.

Watt I (1957) *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and fielding*. London: Pimlico.

Williams R (1961) *The Long Revolution*. London: Chatto and Windus.

---

<sup>1</sup> I wish to argue for Aboulela's so-called 'halal novel', and in particular the critical reception of it, as one manifestation of postsecularism in the literary field. However, the category as a whole is much broader, encompassing a re-emergence of interest in metaphysical and spiritual themes and perspectives more generally. In their Editors' Preface to the Continuum *New Directions in Religion and Literature* series, Mark Knight and Emma Mason point to a canon of critical thinkers whose work has shaped the postsecular turn, constituting what they call 'theo-literary thinking'. These include Walter Benjamin, Martin Buber, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Geoffrey Hartman. (See Bradley and Tate, ix).

<sup>2</sup> The *da'wa*, meaning call or summons, to believe in the true religion of Islam, is practised in the mosque movement by female *da'iya*, or teachers, whose job it is to guide their flock in righteous Islamic living, negotiating everyday challenges and moral conundrums, and advising them on correct dress and behaviour. The *da'wa* movement also has welfare and charitable dimensions too (see Mahmood, 2005: 57-58).

<sup>3</sup> In this argument I am largely following the secularisation thesis as it has been applied to the English novel, with a full awareness that there is much more to be said about its nuances and sometimes outright contradictions as it plays out in slippery literary texts themselves. Indeed, my point is to indicate the inadequacy of this thesis to a proper understanding of literary texts such as *Minaret* and to suggest a divergence between literary practice and critical modes of apprehending it when it comes to certain kinds of cultural difference.

<sup>4</sup> It is also worth remembering the extent to which the lapsed Nonconformist Eliot makes religious stories, references and quotations central to her work: from the angelic child Eppie in *Silas Marner* to the famous closing lines of *The Mill on the Floss* which quote from 2 Samuel 1:23 to describe the turbulent siblings Tom and Maggie Tulliver: 'in their death they were not divided'.



---

<sup>5</sup> Cf. also Michael Kaufmann's introduction to a special issue of *Religion and Literature* devoted to the postsecular where, among numerous useful insights, Kaufmann insists on the need to historicise and complicate our understanding of the relationship between religion and the secular, while also warning against any oversimplified separation between them (Kaufmann, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Edward Said, for example, has criticised formalist approaches such as that of Frye as being based on an idea of an essential 'man doing service as the embodiment of a Judeo-Christian Eurocentric norm', and eschewing the historical and ideological circumstances shaping genres and texts (see Said, 2003: 39). While the notion of archetypes seems to lend itself to transcendent models and dehistoricised abstraction, I am arguing here that this need not be the case. In fact, the confluence of cross-cultural influences and literary paradigms I am suggesting is best evidenced in works such as Maria Rose Menocal's *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History: A Forgotten Heritage* (1987). A more recent volume that attempts to build on Menocal's work is Suzanne Conklin Alkbari and Karla Mallette's *A Sea of Languages: Rethinking the Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History* (2013).

<sup>7</sup> Sura Al-Ar'af (The Heights) 7(1-206). The Heights are the barrier that will divide the saved from the damned on the Day of Judgement. As a narrative archetype, this can be linked with any one of several corresponding Biblical passages, such as the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25: 31-46). Similarly, in the broader mythological universe of Islamic cultural traditions, the fall of Iblis, like the fall of Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost* – one of Frye's touchstone texts – is read ambiguously within the artistic tradition of Sufism as an act of disobedience but also of heroism (although it should be pointed out that, while Milton's Satan refuses to bow before God, Islam's Iblis refuses to bow before Adam since none but God deserve that degree of reverence) (see Awn, 1983).

---