

**Aesthetic of Islamic feminism and Politic of Gender in the study of Leila Aboulela's
*Minaret and Translator***

By

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Abstract

This paper in tandem with the concept of Islamic feminist approach addresses Leila Aboulela radical departure from the tradition of first generation of male novelists where the female characters are denigrated and relegated to the margins of the culture, and confined to the domestic, private sphere. Therefore, the paper attempt to examines Leila's *Minaret* and *Translator* in relation to series of themes and issues, including marriage, family, polygamy, religion, childhood, and education. Equally to demonstrates how literature produced by women writers explicitly and polemically engaged with urgent political issues that have both local and global resonance: the veil, Islamophobia and a distinctively African brand of feminist critique. It also illustrates how Aboulela agrees with Islamic feminists, especially the concept of hijab and its connotations. Islamic feminists are attacked for being selective, non-specialists, non-Arabs, and funded by the West. This paper concludes that both Muslims/Africans and the West are to blame for these fragmented stereotypes. It also emphasizes that Aboulela's heroines are not trusted because they are weak, self-involved, and interested in details rather than actions.

Introduction

In *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (1994), Florence Stratton criticises Gerald Moore, Eustace Palmer, and Eldred Jones for inaccurate evaluations of women's novels. According to Stratton, Eustace Palmer's *An Introduction to the African Novel* (1972) refers only once to a woman writer, labelling Flora Nwapa as 'an inferior novelist.' Stratton further highlights that women are also absent from Palmer's second book, *The Growth of the African Novel* (1979), and Gerald Moore's *Twelve African Writers* (1980). Stratton contends that Palmer and other male critics are using a western or male-dominated canon as a standard for African literature, and completely discounting the fact that their canon excludes women writers. In his introduction to *Twelve African Writers*, Gerald Moore expresses regret, that due to the limited space in his study,

he cannot accommodate 'such new writers as Nuruddin Farah, Ebrahim Hussein, Kole Omotoso, and Femi Sofisan. Stratton indicates that according to this list of male writers, it is worth noticing that by the late 1970s there were numerous women writers who could no longer be described as 'new', such as Bessie Head and Flora Nwapa, both of whom had three novels and a collection of short stories to their credit.

Ama Ata Aidoo also canvassed the ongoing problems faced by African woman writers at the Second African Writers' Conference, held in Stockholm in 1986. In her paper, entitled 'To be an African Woman Writer —An Overview and a Detail', she deplores exclusionary practices and the lack of serious attention from both African and non-African male critics:

In March of 1985, Professor Dieter Riemenschneider came to Harare to give a lecture on some regional approach to African literature. The lecture lasted at least two hours. In all that time, Professor Riemenschneider did not find it possible to mention a single African woman writer. When this was pointed out to him later, he said he was sorry, but it had been 'so natural.' I could have died. It had been natural to forget that quite a bit of modern African literature was produced by women? Why should it be 'natural' to forget that some African women had been writing and publishing for as long as some African men writers?

Aidoo noted that the critical material on women writers has appeared rarely, either in special topic books or in so-called 'special issues' of a few critical journals, for example, the fifteenth volume of *African Literature Today* on women in African literature, published in 1987. However, this academic scholarship, according to Aidoo, is 'often absent-minded at the best, and at the worst, full of veiled ridicule and resentment. When commentary on African women in literature is none of the above, it is certain to be disorganised (or rather unorganised) and choked full of condescension.' Aidoo argues that as writers, African women have the right to be treated as equals, to expect that 'critics try harder to give [their] work some of their best in time and attention, as well as the full weight of their intelligence, just like they do for the work of their male counterparts.

Female Characters in Aboulela's selected Fiction

Aboulela's work aims to de-mythologise Islamic theology, sharia, and rituals. As she is more concerned with the inner faith, rather than with any imposed orthodox version of Islam; much

of her work is devoted to the description of various Islamic rituals, and of how they strengthen the inner faith of her characters and enable them to face life in a pre-dominantly secular environment. When in *The Translator*, Sammar breaks her fast with dates and water at sunset during Ramadan, she ‘felt herself to be simple, someone with a simple need, easily fulfilled, easily granted. The dates and the water made her heart feel big, with no hankering or tanginess or grief’(p,36). At another point, upon entering a makeshift mosque on campus, ‘she felt alone in the spacious room with its high ceiling,’(p,72) but as soon as she recites the first verses of her prayers, ‘the certainty of the words brought unexpected tears, something deeper than happiness, all the splinters inside her coming together’(p,72). Prayer and fasting are presented as integral parts of a process which enables the individual to regain his or her inner sense of peace and equilibrium. Aboulela sees Islamic rituals as personal experiences which need to be experienced without any external enforcement in order to comprehend Islam as a faith; on this view, imposed Islam not only leads to the orthodox practice of religion, but also causes friction among various Muslim communities.

According to Robin Yassin-Kassab, the encouraging and optimistic role of faith is portrayed by Badr in *Lyrics Alley*. Badr is a teacher, living in impoverished conditions with his family, and wants to move into better accommodation. Seeking this, he goes to Mahmud Bey’s office to request the lease of a flat in a new building which is being constructed. However, he is badly treated, and eventually asked to leave when an important guest arrives: Mr Harrison, the manager of Barclays Bank. According to Yassin-Kassab, this embarrassing and demeaning experience can easily become a cause of exasperation, but ‘by spiritualising his struggles the teacher becomes the novel’s most positive figure, the sort who prays in the presence of angels’:

Afterwards, he wanted to ask men who had prayed with him if they, too, had noticed what he had noticed, if they, too, had experienced that thinning of the barriers. 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 (p,59).

This depiction of one of the faithful offering his prayer is very different from the portrayal of Muslims in the western world, where mosque and a practising Muslim both are doubtful, and are often bound up with the rhetoric of fundamentalism or terrorism. Aboulela’s fiction is a riposte to this stereotyping of Muslims in the western media. The emphasis on religion which brings

harmony and tranquillity in Aboulela's characters is present in all of her works. The mosque is very important for both Najwa and Sammar, as it is there that they gain strength from their faith without being suffocated by a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. Regent's Park mosque helps Najwa in London both financially and spiritually. It is through the mosque that she gets her job as Lamy's daughter's babysitter and begins her journey towards spirituality. Aboulela's female characters claim their place in mosques which has been denied to them not by Islam but by orthodox interpretations of Islam, especially Wahhabis. Women of the first Muslim community not only attended mosque, but were also given the right to directly address the Prophet Muhammad and ask him questions. The most significant question women asked Muhammad about the Quran was why it did not address women, while they also accepted Allah and his prophet. This question resulted in the revelation of the Quranic verse addressing both men and women:

For Muslim men and women,
For believing men and women,
For devout men and women,
For true men and women,
For men and women who are
Patient and constant, for men
And women who humble themselves,
For men and women who give
In charity, for men and women
Who fast (and deny themselves),
For men and women who
Guard their chastity, and
For men and women who

Engage much in God's praise,

For them God has prepared

Forgiveness and a great reward (Al Quran, 35vs 35).

This response indicates that Islam promotes equality between men and women, and also shows Muhammad's willingness to listen to women's complaints and to immediately address them. Moreover, it demonstrates women's dynamic and vigorous participations in mosques during the time of Muhammad. (Leila Ahmed, pp. 41-64).

Aboulela's characters are acutely aware of the importance of the mosque in their spiritual lives, as Sammar says:

'There was more reward praying in a group than praying alone. When she prayed with others, she found it easier to concentrate, her heart held steady by those who had faith like her'(p,72).

And in this spiritual journey mosques help Aboulela's female characters. However, this place has been forbidden to women because in orthodox interpretation women cannot achieve the level of spirituality which men do, they cannot have any sort of engagement with politics and as a result remain secluded members of Muslim society. Ahmed argues, 'Muslim women would not be compelled to make the intolerable choice between religious belief and their own autonomy and self-affirmation.' The egalitarianism inherent in what Leila Ahmed calls 'the ethical voice of Islam' is one reason 'Muslim women frequently insist, often inexplicably to non-Muslims, that Islam is not sexist. They hear and read in its sacred text, justly and legitimately, a different message from that heard by the makers and enforcers of orthodox androcentric Islam'(p,76)

The Politics of the Veil

The veil is a powerful symbol, and in the existing post-9/11 environment it would be naïve to generalise about the phenomenon of veiling. It is important to see veiling in historical context, in order to understand it as an emblem (in the west) of Muslim women's supposed oppression. The veil carries different connotations in different Muslim cultures, and therefore the phenomenon of veiling cannot be reduced to a single cultural interpretation. According to Daphne Grace, veiling

can be an index of 'class identity, gender inequality and western opposition', however it is important to establish who is explaining 'the phenomenon of veiling, for whom and to what end' (p,10) The question of who is speaking is crucial, as many Muslim women underline the complexity of veiling by giving varied reasons for using it. Aziza al-Hibri asks, '[w]hy is it oppressive to wear a head scarf but liberating to wear a mini-skirt'(p,46). The veil is no longer a mere piece of cloth in Muslim women's attire; rather, it has become a precarious political issue.

Aboulela deals with the issue of veil in *Minaret*. Najwa and her friend, Randa, first discuss veil in the opening section of the novel in 1984 in Khartoum, and their discussion begins with Iranian women in the black chador in Khomeini's Iran in 1979: 'I turned the pages of an old Time magazine. Khomeini, the Iran-Iraq war, girls marching in black chadors, university girls a woman held a gun. She was covered head to toe, hidden'(p,29). Randa glances at the magazine and expresses her disgust for the hijab: 'totally retarded, we are supposed to go forward, not back to the Middle Ages. How can a woman work dress like that? How can she work in a lab or play tennis or anything? They are crazy. Islam doesn't say you should do that' (p,29). Najwa's second conversation with Randa concerning the veil happens over the telephone many years later in London. Randa is studying medicine at Edinburgh University, and the very sight of Muslim women students wearing the hijab on campus aggravates her. Moreover, Randa never socialises with other Sudanese students, 'so many of them are now Islamists. You know the type, the wife in hijab having one baby after another' (p,134). In her opinion, the hijab restricts women; it is a symbol of backwardness and narrow-mindedness, and should therefore be discarded. Najwa, on the other hand, has a soft spot for hijab and Islam. During her time as a student in Khartoum University, the sight of female students wearing hijab never annoyed her, rather she felt envious of them: 'I envied them something I didn't have but I didn't know what it was'(p,134). The wearing of the veil is not an easy and quick decision for Najwa; it takes her several years to arrive at. During that period, there are several significant stages and moments which influence her final decision to wear the veil: the recurrent images of the girls wearing the hijab; the students praying on the university campus; and her servants in Khartoum getting up in the morning after hearing the sound of the azan, whose words 'passed through the fun [she] had had at the disco and it went to a place [she] didn't know existed' (p,31).

Najwa's first attempt to wear the hijab proves difficult: I stood in front of the mirror and put the scarf over my hair. My curls resisted; the material squashed them down. They escaped, springing around my forehead, above my ears. I didn't look like myself. Something was removed, streamlined; restrained; something was deflated. And was this the real me? Untie the material; observe the transformation which made me look younger? Scarf or no scarf? Which made me look more attractive? The answer was clear to that one. I threw it on the bed. I was not ready yet; I was not ready for this step (p,245). Najwa's decision to not wear the scarf, on the basis that it does not make her look attractive, suggests that the veil is not being used as a political gambit by Aboulela.

According to Robin Yassin-Kassab, '[t]he cloth [veil] has become a flag waved by Islamists and Islamophobes to define each other. Removing it, and putting it on are loaded political acts(p,155). The veil for Aboulela is connected with the inner sharia, and has nothing to do with the right-wing politics in either Muslim countries or the west. Therefore, when Najwa finally decides to wear the hijab, she feels a 'new gentleness'(p,247) around her. However, when she sees her mosque friends without the hijab for the first time at an all-female Eid party, she senses that she is now encountering their true selves: 'We are pleased to see each other without our hijabs and all dressed up for the party, delighted by the rare sight of each other's hair, the skin on our necks, the way make up brightens a face some of us are transformed without our hijabs'(p,184) At one point, Najwa describes the hijab as a 'uniform' and this word further enhances her ambivalent attitude towards the veil.

Aboulela's discussion of the veil in *Minaret* also complicates the phenomenon of veiling. In Aboulela's fiction, the veil is neither a visible marker of Muslim women's identity nor is it related to the Sudanese tradition. Veiling like faith is an individual's personal journey in Aboulela's fiction. The decision to wear a veil as Najwa's independent choice further confirms that veiling has more connotations than just a mere symbol of control over the bodies and sexualities of Muslim women. Aboulela hopes that the west sees the veil in a different light: 'It encourages me when a Western woman comments on my head scarf. When one says 'That is a lovely color' or asks 'Is that batik?' I feel that she has reached out to me.' This ability to see the veil as more than a symbol is important in order to depoliticise veiling.

Faith and Conversion

The biased representation of Muslim women was widespread in the nineteenth century and is still prevalent in the present time. In this environment of extreme mistrust and suspicion towards Islam, Rae's conversion to Islam for a Muslim woman becomes even more problematic. For John A. Stotesbury, 'such novels [*The Translator*] reiterate an implacable creed: for an Islamic woman to envisage personal fulfilment with a Western man, there is only one alternative: the man's conversion to Islam.' I find this reading limited. Aboulela offers here a perspective, something which is not very new, but not familiar for the western audience. According to Aboulela:

I saw *The Translator*, as being a Muslim Jane Eyre. The problem in Jane Eyre is that Mr Rochester can't marry both Bertha and Jane at the same time. As a Muslim I was reading it, and from an Islamic point of view there is no problem. I mean, he can be married to both women. But even though I realised that, I still got caught up in the story, and I could still see things from Jane's perspective. When I wrote *The Translator*, then, I presented a specifically Muslim dilemma, that she can't marry Rae unless he converts. I was hoping that the reader, even though the reader is not a Muslim, would still get caught up in Sammar's dilemma, just as I had been engrossed by Jane's predicament. I see Jane Eyre as a very Christian book, a very religious book, in that the conflict is specific to Christianity: he can't marry two women at the same time. At the end of the novel, he converts after he becomes blind, and there are pages and pages of him talking about God and faith and so on (pp.97-98).

Religion is as vital for Sammar as it was for Jane. Religion has played a very prominent and important role in the development of both Jane and Sammar. Readings by J. Jeffrey Franklin, Janet L. Larson, Marianne Thormahlen, Susan VanZanten Gallagher, and Amanda Witt, for example, all highlight the importance of religion in Jane's bildungsroman.

In *The Translator*, however, according to Brendan Smyth, Aboulela provides an alternative narrative for the relationship between a Muslim woman and Orientalist man. Rae's conversion also contradicts the popular notion that Muslim societies must convert to western ideas of democracy and secular humanism. Sammar tells Rae that '[t]he first believers were mostly women and slaves. I don't know why, maybe they had softer hearts, I don't know' (p,121).

Rae replies,

‘[m]ay be in changing they did not have much to lose. Rae’s perception of Islam as a religion of the oppressed highlights the importance of social justice in Islam. Ali Shari’ati, a prominent Iranian scholar writes: ‘Islam is the first school of social thought that recognises the masses as the basis, the fundamental and consensus factor in determining history – not the elect as Nietzsche thought, not the aristocracy and nobility as Plato claimed, not great personalities as Carlyle and Emerson believed, not those of pure blood as Alexis Carrel imagined, not the priests or the intellectuals, but the masses’(p,121).

Shari’ati finds in Islam a system that ‘does not consider the fundamental factor in social change and development to be personality, or accident, or overwhelming and immutable laws’(p,48). It is for this reason, according to Shari’ati, ‘that we see throughout the Quran address being made to al-nafas, i.e., the people’(p,49). Shari’ati sees Islam as a religion of the masses, especially the marginalised and oppressed, rather than one of terrorists.

Sammar’s life before she develops strong feelings for Rae is described as intensely minimalist: ‘She lived in a room with nothing on the wall, nothing personal, no photographs, no books. Pay the rent for the room and that was all. One plate, one spoon, a tin opener, two saucepans, a kettle, a mug. She didn’t care, didn’t mind’(pp,15-16}. Self-neglect is shown in the fact that a lunchtime sandwich ‘smeared only with butter, was wrapped up in the same cling film as the day before. There was a green furry spot at the edge of the bread’ (p,35). And for her, the prayers are ‘the last touch with normality’ (p,16). But it was love that brought her back to life. During one telephone conversation when Rae told her that she made him feel safe, ‘she picked up the word “safe” and put it aside, to peel it later and wonder what it meant. Sitting on the floor of the landing, she thought that this was a miracle. Not only his voice, but that happiness could come here at the foot of the stairs, the same stairs that were, once, so difficult to climb, that led to her room of hibernation, the hospital room’(p,50). It is the miracle of love that has given her another life. Rae’s conversion triggered by love eventually translates Islam for him. Religion has a very important place in Sammar’s life, but she wants Rae to convert initially for selfish reasons:

‘If you say the shahadah it would be good enough. We could get married. If you just say the words.’

‘I have to be sure. I would despise myself if I wasn’t sure.’

‘But people get married that way. Here in Aberdeen there are people who got married like this. . .’

‘We are not like that. You and I are different. For them it is a token gesture’(p,124-125)

This shows that Sammar, who is a practising Muslim and whose life is centred around Islam, is also flawed and fragile. She wants Rae to convert for the sake of conversion, in order to become an eligible husband for her. However, by the end of the novel, she realises that her intentions for Rae’s conversions are self-centred, and subsequently renounces these motives, although she keeps on praying for his conversion. Sammar’s responses to faith are not intransigent. She is trying to grasp what Aboulela calls ‘Muslim logic’, the acceptance of Allah’s will in her everyday life, including Rae’s initial refusal to convert.

For Aboulela and her characters, Islam does not stay within prayers and fasting, but rather becomes a part of one’s daily life. Her characters are trying to comprehend the essence of the religious experience in their everyday routine, without any externally enforced sharia; as Aboulela herself points out, that she is not interested in writing ‘Islamically correct’ literature. Sammar’s regular prayers for Rae’s conversion imply that Islam, as she understands it, does not prohibit or criminalise such tender emotions. As Willy Maley contends, ‘Sammar’s story suggests that it’s okay to be confused, rebellious, guilty, and selfish – and to fall in love again after a grievous loss, as faith restores and forgives’(p,195).

Shahrazad and Feminism

Sammar’s romance in *The Translator* ends on a happy note, while Najwa’s ends in feelings of guilt and self-recrimination. Najwa accepts money from Tamer’s family to fund her trip to Mecca to perform Hajj, and in return she finishes her relationship with Tamer. Tamer’s family opposes this relationship because of their age gap and social inequality. Najwa apparently prefers

Hajj over her love for Tamer. For Hassan, this preference for religion, which he calls ‘Aboulela’s Islamism’ is regressive. What Hassan did not fully appreciate is that Najwa chooses conservative custom over Islamic example as Muhammad’s first wife, Khadija, was almost fifteen years older than him. Najwa’s decision for Hajj over Tamer is not a matter of preference but a realistic choice. She is aware of the age difference and class difference between them, but more importantly it was Tamer’s immaturity which discouraged her. By the end of the novel, she was ‘smeared with guilt’ that she had taken money from Tamer’s mother as a deal for leaving her son, but Najwa was not forced to take that money, she did it knowingly. She cannot see a future with an immature man, and thus makes a good deal out of it, though a difficult one emotionally.

Najwa fantasises about her ‘involvement in [Tamer’s] wedding to a young suitable girl who knows him less than [her].’ This wife ‘will mother children who spend more time with [her]’ Najwa would be Tamer’s ‘family concubine, like something out of The Arabian Nights. As Hassan argues, this fantasy suggests a complete disavowal of personal liberty. Aboulela’s reference to The Arabian Nights is pertinent here. Shahrazad or Scheherazade is the story teller in that text, also known as *The Thousand and One Nights*. Shahrazad has recently attracted the attention of many Muslim women writers (especially those who are interested in the politics of gender and identity, who have investigated her character and tales, arguing that they challenge western perceptions of Shahrazad as a sexualised, dull, and passive Oriental woman.

Gauch suggests that the Nights has not generally been investigated and analysed as a literary work, but rather as a supposedly accurate representation of the ‘Arab Orient. Subsequently, Shahrazad as an Oriental woman is generally perceived within western culture as a beautiful, exotic seductress. The Moroccan feminist scholar Fatima Mernissi confronts the Orientalist narratives of Shahrazad, and contends that the character stakes her life on the power of her stories; this confirms that Shahrazad is not only intelligent and audacious, but also shrewd enough to manipulate her circumstances to save her life. According to Mernissi, the Oriental Shahrazad is ‘purely cerebral, and that is the essence of her sexual attraction’ Mernissi argues that this understanding of Shahrazad stands in stark contrast to the western perceptions of the character, which views her as an acquiescent Oriental woman; one who only survives King Shahrayar’s malice and brutality because of her salacious beauty. Mernissi suggests that Shahrazad presents Muslim women writers with two major challenges. The first is to fight patriarchal violence and

religious extremism at home; the second is to deal with imperialist anti-Islamic critics in the west. The Parisian writer and activist Marie Lahy-Hollebecque argues that Shahrazad is a feminist: ‘If one recalls that this occurs in an Islamic land, and in an era where all forms of slavery subsisted the world over, one rests astounded by the audacity of views, the absence of prejudices, that permitted an Arab narrator to assign to a woman a role that our Middle Ages never contemplated and that our twentieth century envisions only with great reluctance. After 9/11, Shahrazad resurfaced again alongside undercover woman, and Muslim women writers have used this opportunity to restore her back to a position of confident authority and political astuteness, which has been denied her in European translations and adaptations.

Minaret is set in the post-9/11 world, where a new and wrathful imperial power is emerging; Aboulela’s deliberate reference to Shahrazad is an effort to reclaim her image from the misconstrued European view, a result of imperial prejudice. As Mernissi suggests, ‘[i]f the West has the power to control time by manipulating images, I thought, then who are we if we do not control our images? Who am I – and who makes my image?’ (p,111). Therefore, it is important for Muslim women to tell their own stories, control narrative process, and define their subjectivities. The ending of *Minaret* also raises questions about the western hegemony over feminist ideals. About the ending of her second novel Aboulela says:

When I was writing *Minaret*, I was thinking it would be a Muslim feminist novel. The female protagonist is disappointed in the men in her life: her father disappoints her, then lets her down, she becomes very disillusioned with her boyfriend Anwar, and even Tamer – who is represented sympathetically because he is religious like her – even he disappoints her because of his immaturity. At the end, she relies on God and on her faith. That’s how my logic went. And I thought that if this were a secular feminist novel, then at the end she would rely on her career and maybe her friends after her disappointment with men. In *Minaret*, on the other hand, I wanted

it to be that at the end she's relying on her faith rather than a career (p,9).

For Najwa, to live in Tamer's harem or to go to Mecca to perform Hajj are not odd choices; however, they become odd when they are placed within Eurocentric definitions of female empowerment. Eva Hunter criticises Aboulela for putting Islam and feminism together. Hunter argues that as a secular feminist, any appeal to 'tradition', whether in the name of 'religious beliefs' or 'culture' is problematic for her (p,88). Afsaneh Najmabadi discusses the tension between religion and secularism in her essay '(Un)veiling Feminism.' According to Najmabadi, combining modernity with a reconfiguration of Islam is considered as traditional and anti-modern (p,51). Aboulela's appeal to Islam becomes problematic for secular feminism. For Najmabadi, 'feminism in this situation becomes a screen category (a veil) occluding a historical process by which one kind of modernity was fashioned through the expulsion of Islam onto the beyond of modernity, where backwardness and religion are conflated as Secularism's abject other'(p,52). However, according to Najmabadi, the surfacing of a vocal feminist position from within the ranks of the Islamist movement has destabilised the boundaries between 'hard-line Islamists' and 'secular feminists'(pp,43-52). Aboulela's work also undermines the supposedly rigid boundary between orthodox Islam and secular feminism, by placing female characters within a Sufi Islamic framework, but enabling them to take control of their lives without depending on any man, whether in the form of a father or a husband or a boyfriend. Consequently, reading Aboulela's work and understanding her characters' deep relationship with Islam shows that the religion cannot be considered as inherently regressive, anti-freedom, misogynistic, and against the spirit of feminism.

Conclusively, Aboulela demonstrates through her work that Islam has been hijacked by corrupt postcolonial governments and extreme right-wing groups who have reduced its complexity to one reductive religious ideology. Her interpretation of Islam is not orthodox, and her characters do not strictly follow established religious codes. For Aboulela, Islamic sharia is 'something personal something you would follow yourself. It does not need anyone else to implement it. Aboulela has opened up the world of Muslims, and particularly Muslim women that for many western audiences has been closed, encrypted or barely visible. Aboulela's female protagonists are strong examples of ethical, independent women who provide refreshing possibilities for Muslim women, and thus do not need saving by the west.

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