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Veiling and unveiling fears in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*

The theme of veiling, or more often unveiling, features frequently in contemporary literature as the subject of discussion for both feminists and postcolonial critics. The realms represented by the scholars intermingle, especially in the present times, the times of redefinition of most meaningful values. The issue seems to be of special interest, especially in the context of physical security and emotional safety in the contemporary world. Numerous writers devote much attention to the theme of personal freedom of women representing Muslim community. One of them is Leila Aboulela, a Sudanese writer, who has gained recently much attention. The writer was born in 1964 in Cairo, Egypt where she spent her childhood. She was growing up in Khartoum, Sudan which was soon and for years effectively administered both by Egypt and England. Having gained the university degree Aboulela moved to London, and subsequently to Aberdeen for her husband's work. As the author of four novels and a collection of short stories she is categorized today mostly as a British Muslim author.

Minaret (2005) is Aboulela's second novel and the only that is placed in London. It traces the life of Najwa, born and brought up in a rich and influential Sudanese upper class family. Najwa studies at the University of Khartoum and concentrates mostly on clubbing, attending big parties in luxurious houses and travelling the world with her parents. Her future seems to be obviously promising: she aspires to the role of a wife of a rich man and a mother of beautiful children. Therefore, she neglects her education and does not pay much attention to the university degree. Soon the protagonist's beloved father turns out to be a corrupted government official and, as a result of a coup, he is executed. Najwa, her twin brother, Omar and their mother are expelled from Sudan. When still in Khartoum Najwa dated a young and rebellious student, Anwar. He was a radical socialist who used to accuse and offend Najwa's father for his fraudulent deeds. After the coup he stayed in Sudan whereas Najwa and her family escaped to London and settled in their summer

apartment. There, unable to continue their luxurious life, they all experience failures. Omar is imprisoned for fifteen years for having drugs and trying to stab a policeman. His mother faces leukaemia and a nervous breakdown, and finally dies. Najwa, disillusioned and lonely, cut off from her father's bank accounts, loses her emotional safety and feels physically insecure.

For the first time in her life Najwa had to take up physical work. As she needed to earn money and pay bills she accepted the position of a maid and a nanny in a Muslim house of Lamya and her young daughter, Mai. In spite of the fact that she was employed as a maid Najwa used to describe herself as "a servant". Her employer, beautiful and rich Lamya, occupies the social position Najwa used to occupy in Sudan. Interestingly, the fates of Najwa and Anwar intermingle again in London. The man, as a result of another coup, was exiled to England and the couple start dating again, this time without any control from strict, Muslim protectors. Nevertheless, having learned that Anwar had no intention of marrying her, Najwa resorted to Islam and started visiting a mosque. There the protagonist finds consolation and fulfilment re-discovering her religion anew. In the meantime, Najwa begins a relationship with Lamya's younger brother, Tamar. The boy is fascinated by Najwa's devotion to Islam as he himself is a devout Muslim. He intends to marry Najwa which appears to be a shocking discovery for his mother and sister. Tamar's mother offers Najwa a meaningful sum of money. The protagonist in return is obviously to abandon her son and finish the embarrassing relationship. Surprising as it may seem, Najwa accepts the money in order to fulfil her biggest dream: she intends to go on hajj.

The novel touches upon a number of meaningful issues, among them being the dislocation and loneliness of a young Sudanese woman in a big city. The feelings accompanying young Najwa are reflected in the opening lines:

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. Most of the time I'm good. I accept my sentence and do not brood or look back. But sometimes a shift makes me remember. Routine is ruffled and a new start makes me suddenly conscious of what I've become [...]¹.

The alienation and lowered social position disturb Najwa at the beginning. She feels lost and uncontrolled by rules of Islam, her parents and the laws of the country. Unexpected redefinition of her life is difficult as the protagonist is not a daughter any more, not a wife, or even not an attractive woman she used to be. Walking alone in the streets of London she perceives herself as transparent, invisible and unimportant.

The fact that Najwa was left alone in a big and unfriendly city evoked her fear and distress. She feels culturally and geographically displaced and she cannot avoid the feeling that she should not be in a restaurant alone: "I felt silly sitting all by myself, self-conscious"². After her mother's death the character discovers that she could order a glass of wine in a restaurant or buy a pornographic magazine and nobody would be surprised or nobody would even care. This freedom, however appears to be disturbing and annoying. Najwa feels unprotected and neglected as there is nobody to look after her.

¹ L. Aboulela, *Minaret*, Bloomsbury, London 2005, p. 1.

² *Ibidem*, p. 128.

The employment she took up does not guarantee her financial satisfaction or security. From the very beginning she is afraid she might lose the job. Therefore, she tries to be invisible and deferential:

I take off my coat, fold it and put it over my shoes – it wouldn't be polite to hang it over the family's coats on the coat-rack. I know I must be careful in everything I do; I mustn't slip. The first day is crucial, the first hours. I will be watched and tested [...]³.

The state of insecurity and unstable emotional and financial situation make Najwa search for deeper and more meaningful things in her life. She recognized her identity as blurred, weak and disturbed. In the world of fast cars, determined, well educated women she felt abandoned and lonely.

She had never been a religious person and when her mother died she seemed helpless. She found it impossible to organize a funeral and, surprised, she discovered that there are some women who helped her gratuitously. Observing the women in the mosque Najwa discovered that they seemed to have access to something she missed but was never aware of, that is faith. It was religion that became their identity, not their national belonging or ethnicity. 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. They represent, what Anna Ball calls in her article on diasporic experience, "faith-based identity and community"⁴.

Although Muslim by tradition, Najwa had never paid attention to religion when in Khartoum. Hardly ever did she pray or visit a mosque. *Minaret* presents, in Anna Ball's view, "the journey from securely rooted national belonging into marginality, assimilation or hybridity"⁵ that the protagonist faced in London. The woman, therefore, begins personal journey in order to discover her real identity. Interestingly, Aboulela endeavours to convince a reader that "religious identity provides more stability than national identity"⁶. Obviously, there are numerous sources of identity. The issue of belonging applied by Aboulela, so closely connected with postcolonial studies, seems to be more complicated in case of religious identity. Is identity always connected with belonging? Does one have to belong to discover his/her identity? The author does not give simple answers but, undoubtedly, the reader witnesses the process of coming back to faith which turned out to be "a never ending but fascinating journey of painful surrender but also numerous discoveries"⁷.

In spite of the fact that Najwa had never been an ardent Muslim there was something intriguing for her when she observed young girls covering their heads in Sudan: "I remember the girls in Khartoum University wearing hijab and those who covered their hair with white tobés. They never irritated me, did they?"⁸. Even though her boyfriend,

³ Ibidem, p. 81.

⁴ A. Ball, „*Here is where I am*”. *Rerooting diasporic experience in Leila Aboulela's recent novels*, [in:] J. Wilson (et al.), *Rerooting the Postcolonial*, Routledge, London 2010, p. 118.

⁵ Ibidem, p. 120.

⁶ A. Sethi, *Keep the Faith*, www.observer.co.uk [accessed June 5, 2005].

⁷ A. Stanecka, *Re-positioning of religious functions in Leila Aboulela's "Minaret"*, [in:] E. Krawczyk-Neifar, *Modern Languages and Culture*, WSZOP, Katowice 2016, p. 111.

⁸ L. Aboulela, *Minaret*, op. cit., p. 134.

Anwar, and her best friend, Randa, despised the girls for being backward and conservative, the protagonist never felt that way. Unfortunately, for many years the character was deprived of “guidance and wisdom, [...] grace and forgiveness” so closely connected by Leila Aboulela with religion⁹. In Sudan there were other things more intriguing for the young girl. She was “an emancipated young woman driving her own car to university”¹⁰. Later, her life in London, without emotional and financial support of her relatives, will be turned towards a different direction.

The protagonist of *Minaret* is frequently called Aboulela’s alter ego. The author admits that religion is extremely important and influential in her personal life and literary output. She applied her own perspective to create literature describing the clash between modernity and tradition. What is more, Aboulela also mentions women in her family as most meaningful in shaping her Muslim identity:

My faith was started off by my grandmother and mother and so I always saw it as a very private, personal thing [...]. At the same time, they were very progressive. My grandmother studies medicine in the Forties, which was very rare in Egypt, and my mother was a university professor, so my idea of religion wasn’t about a woman not working or having to dress in a certain way; it was more to do with the faith¹¹.

What brought the sense of spiritual safety to Aboulela was cogency and restraint she discovered in Islam. She claims that in Muslim religion she encountered “spiritual journeys, and familiar depictions of the rigor and patience needed to discipline the ego”¹², but, as she writes, she would never call it oppression or subjection. The message Aboulela tries to vocalize in the novel is that “boundaries can be comforting and nurturing” and “freedom does not necessarily bring happiness”¹³.

Leila Aboulela is one of few authors who publicly admits the weight of religion in her life. What is even more meaningful, she claims that only after the arrival to England did she start wearing hijab. Contrary to what many people might assume, the author felt in England unrestricted possibility of choice and, after painful geographical dislocation, the rebirth of religious emotions: “I didn’t know anybody. It was 1989 and the word “Muslim” wasn’t even really used in Britain at the time; you were either black or Asian. So then I felt very free to wear the hijab”¹⁴. Interestingly, she states that in Khartoum her “personality was shy and quiet and [she] wanted to wear hijab but didn’t have courage, as [she] knew [her] friends would talk [her]out of it”¹⁵.

The author’s experiences are reflected in the protagonist of *Minaret* who begins as a lighthearted and untroubled student, and finishes as a devout Muslim. Her transformation happens slowly but steadily, and it begins with smell and childhood memories:

⁹ L. Aboulela, *Restraint? Sure. Oppression? Never*, www.washingtonpost.com [accessed July 22, 2007].

¹⁰ L. Aboulela, *Minaret*, op. cit., p. 10.

¹¹ A. Sethi, *Keep the Faith*, www.observer.co.uk [accessed June 5, 2005].

¹² L. Aboulela, *Restraint? ...*, op. cit.

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ A. Sethi, op. cit.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

I close my eyes. I can smell the smells of the mosque, tired incense, carpet and coats. I doze and in my dream I am small and back in Khartoum, ill and fretful, wanting clean, crisp sheets, a quiet room to rest in, wanting my parents' room, wanting to get up and go to my parents' room. Men's voices come from downstairs, a low rumble, a cough. I wake up and the cough reminds me of my father, the dream of my parents' room¹⁶.

Positive connotations bring Najwa again to the mosque. She admires the women, their beauty and the way they tie their scarves on their hair. The protagonist remembers that in her family house in Sudan the only religious people were the servants. When she visited her friend Randa, the latter earnestly criticised girls wearing hijabs, claiming that it is impossible to work dressed like this and that the girls wearing chadors take their culture back to the Middle Ages¹⁷. But when Najwa is left alone in London she discovers her heritage anew, independently and she seems to be seduced by it.

When asked, after her mother's death, whether she prays, Najwa answers in a negative way:

I had learnt to pray as a child. I had prayed during Ramadan, during which I fasted mostly in order to lose weight and because it was fun. I prayed during exams to boost my grades. I liked wearing my mother's white robe, feeling the material around me. I liked feeling covered, cosy. But I had often bobbed up and down, not understanding what I was saying, impatient to get the whole thing over with¹⁸.

When the girl started visiting the mosque everything changed and she felt the need to expand her knowledge of Islam. She recalled the students in Sudan resorting to their tradition and their prayer. She admired the girls wearing colourful robes. But most of all, she was impressed by the view of praying students who looked peaceful and happy. One of them was reciting the Qur'an in "an effortless, buoyant style". Najwa looked at the robes of the students, "the spread of colours, stirred by occasional gust of wind"¹⁹. When her attention was distracted by her boyfriend, she got angry and irrationally jealous of the praying students. What was she experiencing? "I envied them something I didn't have but I didn't know what it was. I didn't have a name for it"²⁰. This unexplained situation evoked anxiety and the feeling of uneasiness which later accompanied the girl in London. She felt empty, unaware and deprived of something meaningful.

The protagonist frequently describes her acting on hearing muezzin calling for prayer: "whenever I heard the Qur'an recited I would feel a bleakness in me and a depth and space would open up, hollow and numb. I usually didn't notice it, wasn't aware that it existed"²¹. When she was driving her luxurious car the words of prayer heard on the radio "would tap at this inner sluggishness, nudge it like when my feet went to sleep and

¹⁶ L. Aboulela, *Minaret*, op.cit., p. 74–75.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 29.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 160.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 43.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 134

²¹ *Ibidem*.

I touched them”²². All the incomprehensible things do not allow Najwa to forget about the fear of something undetected.

What is more, the woman realizes that the visits in a mosque gave her a new perspective. She became aware of the fact that her conversion was not accidental: “My guides chose me; I didn’t choose them [...]. The words were clear, as if I had known all this before and somehow, along the way, forgotten it”²³. The more she learned, the more she wanted to discover. She seemed to be hungry for knowledge: “Teach me something old. Shock me. Comfort me. Tell me what will happen in the future, what happened in the past. Explain to me. Explain to me why I am here, what am I doing. Explain to me why I came down in the world. Was it natural, was it curable?”²⁴. Unaware of the meaning of the faith in the past, Najwa now poses difficult and challenging questions. She wants to know more in order to discover her identity.

The decision to convert was complex and it took the protagonist much time to make it consciously. Nevertheless, there was even more difficult battle to be conducted as Najwa decided to surrender and cover her head and the whole body. Rafia Zakaria in her book entitled *Veil* poses important questions concerning the reasons for wearing hijab:

Are our choices, represented by the literal actions we take, the physical picking up of an object such as the veil and its putting on, or at these snapshots of decisions culminations of an ever larger and more involved webs of considerations – a previous experience, a parent’s love, a lover’s command, a friend’s insistence whose collective congruence is sometimes reflected in what we wear or how we choose to appear?²⁵.

In Najwa’s case it resulted rather from a long-lasting process of consideration and hesitance. The latter resulted from fear: but it was not only the concern about being unaccepted by western society, because as Kate Zabrin asserts, “the covering of the body goes directly against mainstream British (and Western) culture in a dramatic and visible way”²⁶. It was also the fear of unaccepting the reflection in the mirror. The young woman was afraid she might look strange or ugly in a scarf covering her hair. Naomi Wolf in *The Beauty Myth* claims that “both women and men [are] accustomed to having beauty evaluated as wealth”²⁷. The leading character in the story always paid much attention to her appearance confirming Wolf’s statement that “women are mere ‘beauties’ in men’s culture so that culture can be kept male”²⁸. Roger Scruton in his book entitled *Beauty* confirms that attractive appearance and desire go together and, undoubtedly, “beauty pleases us” and “distinctive beauty of the human body derives from its nature”²⁹. Although there is no gendered stereotyping in religion Najwa hesitates and is afraid of losing her

²² Ibidem.

²³ Ibidem, p. 240.

²⁴ Ibidem.

²⁵ R. Zakaria, *Veil*, Bloomsbury, London 2017, p. 25.

²⁶ K. Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts: Choosing Alternative Lives*, One World Publications, Oxford 2008, p. 204.

²⁷ N. Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, Vintage Books, London 2015, p. 15.

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 31.

²⁹ R. Scruton, *Beauty*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009, p. 41.

attributes. Similarly, Leila Aboulela admits that wearing a scarf on her head “came after years of hesitation, years during which [she] held back out of fear that [she] would look ugly in a head scarf”³⁰.

Finally, Najwa makes an attempt to wear a scarf. First, unsuccessful trial does not discourage the protagonist. She struggles with her hair and her will:

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 pushed them back, turned my head sideways to look at the back and it was an angular hump, a bush barely covered with cloth. The cotton scarf was almost a threadbare³¹.

The woman is a bit shocked with her reflection: “I didn’t look like myself”, she thought. The character is convinced that something was “removed, streamlined, restrained”³². Anna Ball sums up that the protagonist’s adoption of hijab was simply “a gesture towards modesty and a marker of her femininity”³³ but it proves something more meaningful. As Kate Zebiri quotes after Myfanwy Franks, “in order to wear Islamic dress in Britain today, [women] have to be bold and intrepid”³⁴. The woman, therefore, demonstrates her courage and the desire to feel comfortable and safe, in spite of geographical dislocation she experiences.

So after a number of attempts determined Najwa tries on her mother’s old tobe:

I tied my hair back with an elastic band, patted the curls down with pins. I wrapped the tobe around me and covered my hair. In the full-length mirror I was another version of myself, regal like my mother, almost mysterious. Perhaps this was attractive in itself, the skill of concealing rather than emphasizing, to restrain rather than to offer³⁵.

This time Najwa was satisfied and she accepted her appearance. That was the end of her long and painful journey towards her newly composed self. She escaped from the world of corruption and temptation and resorted to Islam and her new, veiled identity.

Najwa’s spiritual journey and development were over. Earlier, the protagonist experienced humiliation while walking in London and being provoked by men working in the street. She recollects hearing “a whistle and a laugh as one of them shouted something”. Though she did not understand the man, she “understood the tone”, “flushed, aware that all the weight [she] had gained settled on [her] hips”³⁶. When she was veiled she decided to walk the same street and this time there was no sound, the men ignored her completely and avoided her eyes. The same moment she felt invisible and unimportant but happy and fulfilled as she discovered the secret of modesty and surrender to Allah.

Wearing traditional Islamic dress does not always assure physical security. The protagonist of the novel becomes an object of assault when she travels back home on a night bus. Teenagers who spotted her wearing a scarf make fun of her, throwing different objects

³⁰ L. Aboulela, *Restraint? ...*, op. cit.

³¹ L. Aboulela, *Minaret*, op.cit., p. 245.

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ A. Ball, *Here is where I am ...*, op. cit., p. 123.

³⁴ M. Franks, [in:] K. Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts: Choosing Alternative Lives*, One World Publications, Oxford 2008, p. 207.

³⁵ L. Aboulela, *Minaret*, op. cit., p. 246.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 130.

at the back of her head. “You Muslim scum”, she heard, “then the shock of cool liquid on [her] head and face”³⁷. The boys laugh and humiliate her, but she leaves the bus stronger and even more determined to follow her way. Although her safety was challenged, she felt protected by her faith as she was praying all the time on the bus. Interestingly, Kate Zebiri proves that the hostility towards women wearing hijab could be explained by the fact that “it subverts a long-standing tradition in Western culture which assigns to women the role of being looked at, of being evaluated and enjoyed visually, by men in particular, but also by other women”³⁸. Leaving the bus resolute, Najwa made a significant spiritual development.

Wearing hijab became a sort of salvation for the woman. In Zebiri’s view, women who start wearing traditional clothes “report a heightened sense of self-confidence and self-esteem [...] arising in part from a sense that they are now treated as a person rather than as a ‘sex-object’, and also from the fact that they are no longer dressing to please men”³⁹. The protagonist feels happy and released from the necessity to look attractive for men. She also feels safe as the comforting size of the scarf covers her hair. Arimbi claims that one of well-founded reasons for wearing hijab in the past “was to protect Muslim women against men’s harassments”⁴⁰. In Aboulela’s novel, however, covered female body is not the symbol of resistance but rather nurturing power that comes directly from transparent doctrines of Islam. Arimbi confirms that “veiling grants women security and protects them against men’s lust”⁴¹ but in Najwa’s case, it is more about following the rules of the Qur’an, about being modest and spiritually liberated. Amrit Wilson confirms the fact that since “women’s bodies are endlessly and relentlessly sexualised, many Muslim women choose to wear the hijab to establish their own boundaries and their own space”⁴². Najwa additionally endeavours to present her religious position by stating that her body is not to be objectified or treated impersonally but that it became the symbol of her conversion and re-discovered faith. Najwa unveiled her fears and anxieties in order to veil her face and body.

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³⁷ Ibidem, p. 81.

³⁸ K. Zebiri, op.cit., p. 205.

³⁹ Ibidem, p. 207.

⁴⁰ D.A. Arimbi, *Reading Contemporary Indonesian Muslim Women Writers*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2009, p. 34.

⁴¹ Ibidem, p. 38.

⁴² A. Wilson, *Dreams, Questions, Struggles: South Asian Women in Britain*, Pluto Books, London 2006, p. 22.

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Streszczenie

Zakrywanie i odkrywanie strachu w powieści *Minaret* Leili Abouleli

Powieść Leili Abouleli *Minaret* przedstawia losy młodej Sudanki, która w efekcie zamachu stanu wraz z matką i bratem musi opuścić kraj i osiada w Londynie. Podczas gdy w Sudanie Najwa reprezentowała wyższą klasę społeczną, w Londynie, po śmierci matki i uwięzieniu jej brata za posiadanie narkotyków, dziewczyna podejmuje pracę zarobkową. Czuje się zagrożona realiami wielkiego miasta, brakiem pieniędzy i męża, który w kulturze wschodniej przejmuje rolę opiekuna kobiety, nadmierną wolnością. Jest jeszcze strach emocjonalny wywołany tęsknotą za czymś niewyjaśnionym. Tym czymś okazuje się wiara, która staje się dla Najwy wybawieniem. Co ciekawe, bohaterka z czasem decyduje się założyć hidżab, co w kulturze Islamu oznacza skromność i poddanie Allahowi. We współczesnym Londynie Najwa czuje się bowiem bezpieczniej z zakrytym ciałem niż z odkrytym.

Słowa kluczowe: strach, bezpieczeństwo, kobieta, welon, studia postkolonialne, religia

Summary

Veiling and unveiling fears in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*

Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* presents the life of a young Sudanese woman, who was expelled after a coup in the country. Together with her brother and mother she moves to London. In Sudan she was part of the higher social class but in London, after her mother's death and her brother's imprisonment, she needs to work and earn money. She feels endangered by contemporary London realities, lack of financial security, lack of a husband, who in eastern culture takes the role of a protector. She is also overwhelmed with the freedom she unexpectedly has in London. There is also emotional anxiety evoked by something unexplained which appears to be faith. Interestingly, with time the protagonist decides to wear hijab which, in Islamic culture, denotes modesty and surrender to Allah. It turns out that in contemporary London Najwa feels more secure when she is veiled rather than unveiled.

Keywords: fear, security, a woman, veil, postcolonial studies, religion