# Islam and Women's Literature in Europe

## Reading Leila Aboulela and Ingy Mubiayi

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Contrary to the perception that Islam is against women and against the European way of life, some Muslim women based in Europe write novels and short stories in which Islam is described as instrument of empowerment in the life of their female characters. No more or not only an element of oppression, religion is portrayed as an element of a new identity for Muslim women who live in Europe.

*The Translator*[1] and *Minaret*[2] by Leila Aboulela (Sudan/United Kingdom) and "Concorso"[3] by Ingy Mubiayi (Egypt/Italy) are three works that demonstrate how the re-positioning of religion functions in women's lives and struggles.

I will first analyze the two novels written in English by Aboulela, followed by the short story written in Italian by Mubiayi.

In *The Translator* (1999), Aboulela tells the story of Sammar, a young Sudanese woman who followed her husband, a promising medical student, to Scotland. After her husband dies in a car accident, Sammar is alone in this foreign country. In Aberdeen she spends several painful and lonely years, far from her home and son who, after the terrible accident, lives in Khartoum with her aunt/mother-in-low. During this time, religion, day by day, becomes her only relief. Suddenly she finds work as an Arabic to English translator for an Islamic scholar, Rae, at a Scottish University, and she falls in love with him. Though her love is reciprocated, they have a problem. Rae is not Muslim, and for Sammar, Islam shapes and affects all aspects of life. She cannot live with a man who does not share this belief and decides to go back to Khartoum to live with her son.

Born as an intellectual and spiritual friendship in a cold university town, Rae and Sammar's story develops between Scotland and Sudan, and tells of the meeting of two different cultures, which concludes with Rae's conversion to Islam.

In *Minaret* (2005), Aboulela writes the story of Najwa, another Sudanese woman who has emigrated in Europe. She is forced to flee to the UK with her mother and her twin after a military coup in her country. The daughter of an upper class family, she grows up in Khartoum in a privileged secular and Western environment: American schools, parties with alcohols, fashionable clothes... But in London her life changes radically. A series of terrible events - her father's execution in Sudan, her mother's death for leukaemia, and her brother's imprisonment for dealing drugs - force her into poverty. "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" (p. 1), says Najwa in the first line of *Minaret*. After her mother's death, in fact, Najwa's only option is to work as maid, and the extravagant Sudanese lifestyle is a distant memory. Even the men with whom she falls in love, the

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[1] L. Aboulela, *Minaret*, New York, Black Cat, 2005.
[2] L. Aboulela, *The Translator*, New York, Black Cat, 1999.
[3] I. Mubiayi, "Concorso", in G. Kuruvilla *et al*, *Pecore nere*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2006a (3rd ed.), pp. 109-138.

atheist Anwar, before, and the religious Tamer, later, are not able to give her the new family she needs. In the loneliness of her exile she turns to religion, and Islam becomes the only relief to the sudden difficulties and great solitude in which she finds herself. Through her growing faith she discovers a new peace and a new community. The prayer meetings with other women, the hijab which covers her head and the *muezzin*'s voice give her an unexpected power to deal with her everyday problems.

Both *The Translator* and *Minaret* (which I will analyze together) tell about a world in transformation, people who emigrate from one country to another and build new transnational spaces. Aboulela focuses, above all, on women's migrations. Her main characters are two women, Najwa (in *Minaret*) and Sammar (in *The Translator*), who live by themselves: the former in England, the latter in Scotland. Even though both arrive in the UK with their families, tragedies force them to live alone. Najwa and Sammar, like other Aboulela's characters, come from Sudan, an African country shaken by *coups d'etat* and poverty. Their lives in UK are not easy, because being a foreigner marks their daily life. This state of exile and dislocation color the mood of both the books. The suffering of the migrant protagonist is a central theme for Aboulela. She returns several times to this subject, mapping the deep mental suffering that marks the lives of several immigrants. Reading her, it is possible to find echos of the "suffering of the post-colonial subject" studied by Fanon[4] and "the double absence" analized by Sayad[5]. Najwa and Sammar, in fact, suffer both mentally and phisically from their exile. Hallucinations and dreams characterize their time abroad. In *The Translator,* Aboulela writes, "Outside Sammar stepped into a hallucination in which the world had swung around. Home had come here. Its dimly lit streets, its sky and the feel of home had come here and balanced just for her. She saw the sky cloudless with too many stars, imagined the night warm, warmer than indoors. She smelled dust and heard barking of stray dogs among street's rubble and pot-holes. A bicycle bell tinkled, frogs croaked, the muezzin coughed into the microphone and began the azan for the *Isha* prayer. But this was Scotland and the reality left her dulled, unsure of herself. This had happened before but not for so long, not so deeply. Sometimes the shadows in a dark room would remind her of the power cuts at home or she would mistake the gurgle of the central-heating pipes for a distant azan" (pp. 20-21). In *Minaret*, Najwa dreams ceaselessly of being a child back at her family home, surrounded by her parents' love. The book ends with one of these dreams/hallucinations: "I am not well. I have a fever and I need my parents' room. I need their bed; it is clean sheets, the privilege. I climb dark steep stairs to their room and there is the bed I have been forgetting for" (p. 276). But suddenly this room transforms, and appears in ruins.

However, the country of exile is not only ugly and inhospitable; Aboulela also describes it with empathy. In the first page of *Minaret*, Najwa, says, "London is at its most beautiful in autumn... Now it is at its best, now it is poised like a mature woman whose beauty is no longer fresh but still surprisingly potent" (p. 1).

In searching for a place where she can feel at home, Najwa is only able to find it in Islam. Aboulela presents religion as a system of life, through which the characters deal

[4] F. Fanon, *I dannati della terra*. Torino, Einaudi, 1962.
[5] A. Sayad, *La double absence, des illusions de l'émigré aux souffrances de l'immigré*. Paris, Seuil, 1999.

with everyday life and build a new community in Europe. Islam is also a relief for mental illness. In *The Translator*, Aboulela writes, "Four years ill in a hospital she had made for herself. Ill, diseased with passivity, time in which she sat doing nothing. The whirlpool of grief sucking time. Hours flitting away like minutes. Days in which the only thing she could rouse herself to do was pray the five prayers. They were the only challenge, the last touch with normality, without them she would have fallen, lost awareness of the shift of day into night" (p. 16). The Islam described by Aboulela is a new Islam, it is not the supposed immutable and fixed Islam that men and women bring in Europe from their homeland. It is something new that people find and build in the countries where they immigrate. Najwa finds Islam in the UK, as Aboulela did. In an interview this author, in fact, says, "I grew up in a very westernised environment and went to a private, American school. But my personality was shy and quiet and I wanted to wear the hijab but didn't have the courage, as I knew my friends would talk me out of it." Once in London, it became easier, "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" [6]. In Sudan, Najwa's religion is relegated to certain moments: birth, marriage, holidays... It does not shape daily life. In Khartoum and during her first years in London, she lives a Western life where Islamic behavior and rituals do not take place. When her mother dies, she does neither help to wash her body, as is the custom among Muslims. Najwa says, "I had prayed during Ramadan, during which I fasted mostly in order to lose weight and because it was fun. I prayed during school exams to boost my grades. [...] It would be difficult for me to pray, to remember the times of the prayer, to wash, to find clean cloth to cover myself" (pp. 160-161). So the Islam that she finds in Europe is something completely new, something she has not brought from Sudan. "We weren't brought up in a religious way, neither of us. We weren't even friends in Khartoum with people who were religious [...] Our house was a house where only the servants prayed" (p. 95). A mosque in secular England is where she learns more about Islam, and it is a group of women from all over the world (Arab countries, Malaysia, India...), who lead her to embrace religion. Their nationality does not matter anymore; it is Islam that brings people together. For many Muslim people their own main identity does not come from a passport, an ideology or an ethnicity, but from religion. In the name of Islam some of the mosque's women help Najwa when her family crumbles. Day by day, these foreign women become her new family and the mosque turns out to be the only place where she can find a new community to replace the one she has lost. Also Sammar is helped by women who are stranger to her. When her husband dies, she is supported by unknown Muslim women who are strangers to her, not by the Sudanese community. Aboulela writes, "People helped her, took over. Strangers, women whom she kept calling by the wrong names, filled the flat, cooked for her and each other, watched the everwandering child so she could cry. They prayed, recited the Qur'an, spent the night on the couch and on the floor. They did not leave her alone, abandoned. [...] Now the presence of these women kept her sane, held her up. She went between them thanking them, humbled by the awarness that they were not doing this for her or for Tarig, but only because they believed it was the right thing to do" (pp. 8-9). This was also true for Aboulela. The women met at the mosque were her social universe when she arrived in the UK. In an

[6] A. Sethi, "Keep the faith", *The Guardian*, 5 june, 2005.

interview she thanks the sisters she met at Aberdeen Mosque, saying they "supported me and became my new family away from home"[7]. These women, who speak with different accents and have foreign names are the symbol of that de-territorialization of Islam that Aboulela returns to many times in both her books. In *Minaret*, a discussion between Najwa and Tamer makes this issue very clear, "'Do you feel you're Sudanese?' I [Najwa] ask him [Tamer]. He shrugs. 'My mother is Egyptian. I've lived everywhere except in Sudan: Oman, Cairo, here. My education is Western and that makes me feel that I am Western. My English is stronger than my Arabic. So I guess, no, I don't feel very Sudanese though I would like to be. I guess being a Muslim is my identity. What about you?' I talk slowly. 'I feel that I am Sudanese but things changed for me when I left Khartoum. Then even while living here in London, I've changed. And now, like you, I just think of myself as a Muslim'" (p. 110). And in *The Translator*, Aboulela lets Rae (who has at last converted to Islam) say to Sammar who is trying to decide if she should marry him and leave Sudan, "Ours is not a religion of suffering [...] nor is it tied to a particular place" (p.198). Aboulela, who, like Najwa, found Islam in the West, specifically says in an interview that her religious identity is more important than her nationality, "I can carry [religion] with me wherever I go, whereas the other things can easily be taken away from me"[8]. In Aboulela's fiction, the community of reference is the Islamic global ummah which is made up of immigrants and converts. In *Minaret* and *The Translator* converts are described as an important part of this new generation of European Muslims. The conversions, in fact, emphasize the emergence of the transnational Islamic community, which crosses national and ethnic boundaries. Moreover they confirm that the re-positioning of religion in the public sphere is a process taking place in the West as in the East. From the first pages of *The Translator* Rae's character is built around the issue of conversion, which, though it happens only at the end of the book, is always present. Already in the second chapter, Sammar asks her friend Yasmin, "'Do you think he could one day convert?' Mirages shimmered on the asphalth" (p. 21). Aboulela also speaks about converts in *Minaret*; Najwa says, "Ali intrigued me. I had got the impression from Anwar that the English were all secular and liberal. Ali was nothing like that, yet he was completely English and had never set foot outside Britain" (p. 241). And in another instance she says to Anwar, who is atheist, "It's interesting about converts isn't it? What would make a Westerner become a Muslim? [...] I think they're brave" (p. 159).

So, through the histories of Najwa, Sammar and the other characters of *Minaret* and *The Translator*, we can look at the continual re-positioning and re-definition of religion in modern societies, from a literary prospective. This re-positioning of religion in the public sphere is one of the most challenging component in the current process of cultural globalization and is part of a wider process through which religious concepts have re-entered the political arenas, re-shaping the idea of modernity. Aboulela's fiction describes the emergence of this transnational ummah with poignancy. In *The Translator*, she lets Rae say, "No one writing in the fifties and sixties predicted that Islam would play such a significant part in the politics of the area. Even Fanon, who I always admired, had no insight into the religious feelings of the North Africans he

[7] S. Eissa, "Interview with Leila Aboulela". *The i Witness*, July, 2005.
[8] A. Sethi, *op. cit.*.

wrote about. He never made the link between Islam and anti-colonialism. When the Iranian revolution broke out, it took everyone by surprise. Who were these people?" (p. 109).

A symbol of this global Islam, which is re-shaping real and methaphorical landscapes, is the minaret of the Regent's Park mosque that stands out against the sky of London. "The trees in the park across the road are scrubbed silver and brass. I look up and see the minaret of Regent's Park mosque visible above the trees" (p. 1), Aboulela writes on the first page of *Minaret*. For Najwa that minaret is her reference point, which keeps her from losing her way in big uneasy London. "We never get lost because we can see the minaret of the mosque and head home towards it", she says walking with Tamer (p. 208). In a country where Najwa has no reference points and support networks, home is not the overseas Sudanese community in exile or the assimilationist Britain, but a transnational Muslim community which has been reshaping geographical and mental maps.

It does not seem that the Islamic ummah described by Aboulela has a specific political project, even if Aboulela suggests the importance of going back to Islamic roots to understand how to rule a country. In *The Translator* Rae says, "Governments come and go and they can aggressively secularise like in Turkey, where they wiped Islam off the whole curriculum, or marginalize it like they did most everywhere else, separating it from other subjects, from history even. But the Qur'an itself and the authentic hadiths have never been tampered with. They are there as they had been for centuries" (pp. 108-109). But there is not a detailed political project in Aboulela's books. In *Minaret*, Najwa says: "In Queensway, in High Street Kensigton, we would watch the English, the Gulf Arabs, the Spanish, Japanese, Malaysians, Americans and wonder how it would fell to have, like them, a stable country. A place where we could make future plans and it wouldn't matter who the government was - they wouldn't mess up our day-to-day life. A country that was a familiar, reassuring background, a static landscape on which to paint dreams. A country we could leave at any time, return to at any time and it would be there for us, solid, waiting" (p. 165).

Aboulela's political ideas seem to be a general criticism of the misuderstanding of Islamic message. She is critical of the betrayal of Muslim roots by the Eastern countries and the materialism of the West, as well. She also lambastes Muslim terrorism. In a conversation between Rae and Sammar - who is going to works as translator for an anti-terrorist project in Egypt - Aboulela lets the two characters make these comments about terrorists, "'There is something pathetic about the spelling mistakes, the stains on the paper, in spite of the bravado. There are truths but they are detached, not tied to reality...' 'They are all like that.' 'You get a sense of people overwhelmed,' she went on, 'overwhelmed by thinking that nothing should be what it is now.' 'They are shooting themselves in the foot. There is no recourse in the Sharia for what they're doing'" (p. 26).

Aboulela also reveals a very interesting political theme that runs through both books: the tension between Islam and Communism and more generally with the left. It is a crucial point both in *Minaret* and in *The Translator*. Aboulela's characters have a constant relationship with Marxist ideology. It seems that Islam succeeds where Communism fails. In Aboulela's novels we can see the anger against Communism and

more generally, the anger against a rationality that denies the religious dimension of humans, against those who believe that it is "backward to have faith in anything supernatural; angels, djinns, Heaven, Hell, resurrection", and despising "those who needed God, needed Paradise and the fear of Hell" (*Minaret*, p. 241). Behind this repudiation there is also a subtle attraction. It is something close to the feeling of falling in love. Najwa's love for Anwar, a Communist student who is a member of the popular front (which will defeat the Sudanese government and establish a Communist regime), and Sammar's love for Rae, the leftist Islamic expert, are examples of this kind of attraction/repulsion. The outcomes of these relationships are completely different. Najwa and Anwar's relationship does not work; they have different views on politics and religion. Trying to imagine her life with Anwar in a Communist Sudan, Najwa says, "I wanted to know how to live with that, how to be happy with that. Change, he would say, revolution. But I had been hurt by change, and the revolution, which killed my father, did not even do him the honour of lasting more than five years" (p. 164). Sammar and Rae, on the other hand, get married after Rae's conversion to Islam. "'What I regret most,' he [Rae] said, 'is that I used to write things like *Islam gives dignity to those who otherwise would not have dignity in their lives*, as if I didn't need dignity myself'" (p. 199). These two love stories play a prominent role in the plot of *Minaret* (Najwa/Anwar) and *The Translator* (Sammar/Rae) and seem to hint at the tension toward Marxist ideology that has been common in the Islamic world. Indeed, this world has known different attitudes which, to continue with the metaphor of love, can be described as: attraction, seduction, attempt to build a relationship (the Socialist or Communist regimes), repudiation, disappointment, desire for something different (the re-positioning of Islam as a spiritual dimension and/or political project).

Aboulela's books are very useful for better understanding the re-positioning of religion in the public sphere and the role of women in this process. The author focuses on the point of view of Muslim women who feel the need to re-position and re-construct religion in their lives. She does not speak in name of Muslim women *tout court*, however she offers important elements to think about Islamic worldview in Europe. Her main contribution is her ability to tell about the emerging ummah from a women's worldview. Aboulela makes us hear voices which are usually condamned to silence. Few writers have done the same. Among the scholars, Saba Mahmood and some others have helped make women believers' points of view visibile. Actually, the pious women described in *The Translator* and in *Minaret* are reminescent of the Egyptian women among whom Saba Mahmood conducted her fieldwork in some mosques of Cairo, later described in *Politics of piety. The islamic revival and the feminist subject*[9]. In this book she focuses on the women's mosque movement - also called the women's piety movement - which has been growing as part of the larger Islamic Revival that has swept the Muslim world since the 1970s. Mahmood's book and similar descriptions of the women's piety movement contained in Warnock Fernea[10] and Mai Yamani[11]'s books can help to contextualize and better our understanding of Aboulela's female characters. The Egyptian women with whom Mahmood worked, like Najwa and the other believers

[9] S. Mahmood, Politics of piety:the islamic revival and the feminist subject, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2004.
[10] E. Warnock Fernea, *In search of islamic feminism*, New York, Anchor Book, 1998.
[11] M. Yamani, *Feminism & Islam. Legal and Literary Perspectives*, Londra, Ithaca Press, 1994.

of Regent's Park mosque in London, attend lessons led by other women. In weekly classes they study and debate Islamic scriptures (Qur'an, hadith and associated exegetical literature), social and cultural practices. Made up by women with different cultural, social and economic backgrounds, the mosque's women movement first emerged in the East, but it soon spreads to the West too, to increase religious knowledge.

For Najwa the weekly lessons are very important, they help her understand how to conduct her daily life. She says, "I liked the talks at these gatherings because they were serious and simple, vigorous but never clever, never witty. What I was hearing, I would never hear outside, I would never hear on tv or read in a magazine. It found an echo in me; I understood it" (pp. 242-243). Many pages of *Minaret* are dedicated to the portrait of women's courses at the mosque. It is a central theme for Aboulela who writes, "It being a Monday, I have my Qur'an Tajweed class at the mosque...The ladies' area is empty when I arrive. It doesn't surprise me. Soon the others will come for the class, and later more sisters will come accompanying their husbands for the Isha prayer. I put on the lights and pray two rakas' greeting to the mosque. Then I roll my coat like a pillow and strech out" (p. 74). The mosque is not only a place for praying, it is also a room for taking a rest, meeting friends and letting children play, "The eldest girl sits away from us with a Game Boy. The two boys run off, the whole mosque is their playground" (p. 75). In addition, the mosque also becomes a classroom where women can discuss the Islamic history and doctrine, and practice Arabic in order to read the Qur'an in the original language in which it was revealed. "The lesson has already started; everyone is sitting in a large circle. Um Waleed in sitting on her knees, which makes her a little bit higher than the others; her voice is clear and loud. She is someone else now, someone I love, my teacher, specific in everything she says, sharp and to the point. The Qur'an is open on her lap; she pulls her scarf over her forehead, and pushes back strands of the hair that have escaped. [...] The Tajweed class is my favourite" (p. 78). "Um Waleed is a qualified teacher, with a degree in Sharia Law. Many of the sisters say that her other classes on Law and History are more interesting - they generate a lot of discussion and sisters, especially the young British-born ones and the converts, like to discuss and give their opinions" (p. 79). The emergence of women's lessons shows how women are reshaping Islamic movements. According to Mahmood, in fact, these lessons reconfigure the gendered practice of Islamic pedagogy and the social institution of mosques[12], even if some restrictions remain. For example, women are not allowed to lead mixed prayers and can just guide other women. However theological and doctrinal subjects which were, until recently, discussed only by men, "are now debated by ordinary women in the context of mosque lessons modeled to some extent on protocols of public address and modern education (rather than on the traditional Islamic schools, Kuttab)"[13]. In both Aboulela's books women have taken on the traditionaly male role of inviting people to embrace Islam (*da'wa*[14]). In *Minaret* she focuses on the women at the mosque who guide her to Islam, "Wafaa took me shopping for my headscarves. [...] Back in her house, in her bedroom, with her daughters as audience, she showed me how

[12] See S. Mahmood, *op. cit.* , pp. 79-117 and pp.153-188.
[13] S. Mahmood, *op. cit.*, p. 55.
[14] For a better analyze of the concept of *da'wa* see S. Mahmood, *op. cit.*, pp. 57-61.

to tie each one, what folding I needed to do beforehand, where to put the pins. [...] Where did she come from, this woman? It was her role to shroud my mother for her grave and teach me how to cover my hair for the rest of my life. She was a guide, not a friend. One day she would move away to another pupil and I would graduate to another teacher" (pp. 246-247). In *The Translator*, Sammar functions as guide to Islam for Rae. She, a woman, leads a man to convert. Through a woman the religious message is passed on. In *The Translator*, Sammar says, "The first believers were mostly women and slaves. I don't know why, maybe they had softer hearts, I don't know..." (p. 124).

Aboulela's pious women are not submissive and subjected by men in the way that a certain collective imagination would have them be. Instead both Najwa and Sammar challenge many stereotypes about Muslim women. They live by themselves in a foreign country and make their own choices. They do not have families around that advise, forbid, or force them to do or not to do. There are no men who prohibit or oblige. Najwa and Sammar choose to attend classes at the mosque and wear the hijab on their own. Once in Europe no one pays attention to them. They choose to cover their head, to go to the mosque, to pray...because they think those are the right things to do. They defend their convinctions despite the fact that the men they love have different ideas. Even if Sammar loves Rae deeply, she is not willing to do whatever Rae wishes. She prefers to renounce him and return to Sudan, rather than compromising and giving up Islam. It is Rae, who through a long personal struggle, decides to convert to Islam and go back to her, asking her to marry him. On the other hand, Najwa chooses to remain alone rather than continuing her relationship with Anwar, in part because he is an atheist. Both Sammar and Najwa choose to wear the hijab as a personal choice, even if it is hard sometimes. Sammar feels that she and Rae do not can seem a couple, "because of who she was, how she dressed" (p. 116). And Najwa has to deal with the violent scorn of young people because of her hijab, "Laughter from behind me. Something hits the edge of the seat next to me and bounces down the aisle; I don't know what it is. He has missed his target this time. Will they move closer, and what if they run out ot things to throw? [...] I hear footsteps come up behind me, see a blur of denim. He says, 'You Muslim scum', then the shock of cool liquid on my head and face. I gasp and taste it, Tizer. He goes back to his friends - they are laughing. My chest hurts and I wipe my eyes" (pp. 80-81).

For Aboulela, who also wears the hijab, the veil gives a new dignity to women. They are not looked at for their bodies, but for who they are for their faith. Najwa says, "it is as if the hijab is a uniform, the official, outdoor version of us. Without it, our nature is exposed" (p. 186). In *Minaret* and in *The Translator* the headscarf is also an element of beauty. Wearing the traditional Sudanese headscarf, Najwa says, "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 offer" (p. 246). And after she bought her first headscarves, Najwa maintains, "When I went home, I walked smiling self-conscious of the new material around my face. I passed a window of a shop, winced at my reflection, but then thought 'not bad, not so bad'. Around me a new gentleness" (p. 247). The issue of the veil runs through the entire plot of *Minaret*. It is a central point from the first pages of the book. Although Najwa wears western style clothes in Khartoum, she is attracted to the veil. Once, looking at the veiled girls who

attend courses at her university, she says, "with them I felt, for the first time in my life, self-conscious of my clothes; my too short skirts and too tight blouses. Many girls dressed like me, so I was not unusual. Yet these provincial girls made me feel awkward. I was conscious of their modest grace, of the tobes that covered their slimness - pure white cotton covering their arms and hair" (p. 14). But at that time, in her environment the veil was totally banned. "'Totally retared,' she [Najwa's best girlfriend] said looking at the picture and handing me a spoon. 'We're supposed to go forward, not to go back to the Middle Ages. How can a woman work dressed like that? How can she work in a lab or playing tennis?'" (p. 29). But for Aboulela the veil is not at all a symbol of Middle Ages and ignorance. It is a sign of awareness. In contrast to the prevalent idea that those who wear headscarves and attend mosques come from the lower classes and are ignorant, Najwa and Sammar are educated. Furthemor, as Mahmood points out, women's entry into the field of *da'wa* and in the women's mosque movement have been facilitated by increased female literacy[15]. Many believers went to school and univerisity, and are professionals. Pious women study to understand the holy texts in order to go back to the Qur'an on their own and understand the Islamic message. So, despite they do not challenge Islamic orthodoxy and patriarchal readings of Qur'an as Islamic feminists, like Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas and Ziba Mir Hosseini[16], however, they interact with the Islamic texts in a new way. Through this effort in re-reading the Qur'an and the other sacred texts, they assert themselves in the Islamic ummah. They are making their own decisions. We do not necesseraly like their choices, but this is another issue that will not be addressed here. What is important here is that from literature comes portraits of pious women who are determining their own lives and contributing to build the Islamic ummah in contemporary societies. This does not mean that patriarchy no longer exists, rather many women are dealing with gender roles in a new and unforeseen way.

Moreover, the same life of Leila Aboulela strengthens that it is possible to conciliate Islam, modernity, education and women's empowerment. "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 faith", she said in an interview to the Guardian in 2005[17]. Having raised in a very progressive environment - her grandmother studied medicine in Egypt in the Forties, and her mother was an university professor in Sudan -, she graduated in Economics at the University of Khartoum in 1985, and then enrolled at the *London School of Economics* to pursue an MSc in *Statistics*. Actually, it was in those years in London that she turns to a deeper engagement with Islam, going regularly to mosque and wearing the hijab. However, her religious belief and behavior did not prevent her from becoming one of the most recognized writers in English in the last years. On the contrary, Aboulela is on the international cultural scene for several years. In 1999, her novel "The Translator" was longlisted for the Orange and the IMPAC prizes, and in 2001 she won the Caine Prize for African Writing for 'The Museum', a short story which is included

[15] S. Mahmood, *op. cit.*, p. 66.
[16] See A. Barlas, *"Believing Women": Sex/Gender, Patriarchy and the Quran*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2002; Z. Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender: the Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran*, Princeton, Princeton Univerity Press, 1999; A. Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam*, Oxford, Oneworld press, 2006.
[17] A. Sethi, *op. cit.*.

in her collection entitled "Coloured Lights'". So, through literature, Aboulela, such as her characters Najwa and Sammar, gets visibility in an Europe where Muslim women, especially those who wear *hijab*, are invisible to most eyes.

Certainly, unlikely Islamic feminists, in her books Aboulela never criticizes openly the reactionary and misogynistic interpretations of Islam that exist inside the Islamic ummah. Neither does she openly challenge the gender inequality that some interpretations of Qur'an can suggest. Najwa and Sammar have conservative ideas of mixed space between men and women. Najwa says, "I liked the informality of sitting on the floor and the absence of men. The absence of the sparks they brought with them, the absence of the frisson and ambiguity. Without them the atmosphere was cool and gentle, girly and innocent with the children all around us, chubby little girls sitting close to their mothers, baby boys who crawled until they reached the wall, pulled themselves up to stand proud and unsteady" (p. 242).

In Najwa and Sammar's worldview the marriage is very important. It is the framework of the human life, and governs the relationships between men and women. In *The Translator* Aboulela writes, "She [Sammar] envied Freed because he was married and she was not, and marriage was half of their faith" (p. 108). Good husbands have to take good care of their wives and children and are not supposed to oppress their women. Najwa says, "These men Anwar condemned as narrow-minded and bigoted, men like Ali, were tender and protective with their wives. Anwar was clever but he would never be tender and protective" (p. 242). However Aboulela's characters accept the idea of polygamy. Sammar, after the death of her husband would like to become the second wife of an old man rather than remain alone. It is her aunt/mother-in-low that prohibits this. Polygamy is also a possibility in *Minaret*. Najwa contemplates it when Tamer asks her to marry him, "'Well, to say yes, you must promise me you'll take a second wife.' 'What a stupid thing to say, Najwa!' 'Because I might not be able to have children [...] I wouldn't want you divorce me. I would rather be in the background of your life, always part of it, always hearing your news'" (pp. 254-255).

Telling stories of Muslim women from an Islamic worldview makes Aboulela's fiction one of the first examples of "Islamic literature". Muslim News called her work "Halal Literature". According to al Ghazouli, it is one of the first cases of islamic-informed writings which took place on the international literary scene. "What makes her writing 'Islamic' is not religious correctness or didacticism. Rather, it is a certain narrative logic where faith and rituals become moving modes of living[18]". In fact, Islam re-shapes lives and behavior of the characters of the book. Religion gives a new paradigma of existence. However Aboulela's characters are not abstract models of pious Muslims, people who act always well. For example, Sammar is not a model widow devoted to her son. She wishes that her son had died instead of her husband. "She had given the child to Mahsen and it had not meant anything, nothing, as if he had not been once a piece of her, with her wherever she walked. She was unable to mother the child. The part of her that did the mothering had disapperead. Froth, ugly, froth. She had said to her son, 'I wish it was you instead. I hate you. I hate you" (p. 7). Or "She had never, not once, prayed that he [Rae] would become a Muslim for his own sake, for his own good. It had

[18] F.J. Ghazoul, "Halal fiction", *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, July 2001, pp.12-18.

always been for herself, her need to get married again, not be alone" (p. 175). So the portrait of Islam that comes out has several facets. Aboulela's books are not the voice of Islam, but they concern with some interpretations of Islam. "I am interested in writing about Islam not as an identity but going deeper and showing the state of mind and feelings of a Muslim who has faith.- says Aboulela in an interview - I want also to write fiction that follows Islamic logic. This is different than writing 'Islamically correct' literature - I do not do that. My characters do not behave necessarily as a 'good Muslim' should. They are not ideals or role models. They are, as I see them to be, ordinary Muslims trying to practice their faith in difficult circumstances and in a society which is unsympathetic to religion[19]". More than a portrait of Islam *tout court*, her fiction concerns with difficulties and opportunities of being Muslim in Europe today.

While Leila Aboulela is already a mature writer, having already written two novels and a book of short stories, translated into six languages and well recognized internationally, Ingy Mubiayi has just made her debut as a fiction author. Yet, she can be considered one of the most promising authors in the new field of immigrant literature in Italy. Unlike the United Kingdom, where there is a long tradition of post-colonial writers, in fact, in this South European country, immigrant literature is a new and unexplored genre.

In "Concorso" Mubiayi tells the story of Italian born two sisters, Hayat and Magda, who live in Italy with their Egyptian mother. Their father left them long time ago. They have been raised in a completely Italian environment in a suburb of Rome. The younger girl, Hayat, the narrator of this tale, studies law and wants to join the police force. Her attempt to apply for the police's competitive entrance examination gives the title to the short story, and represents the frame for the tale. The plot develops during the hours in which she has to decide whether to apply or not. The older sister, Magda, who studies Architecture, has a past in Italian leftist organizations and just turned her social involvement in an Islamic framework. She has now started to get up early to pray and now wears the *hijab*. Magda and Hayat's lives are very different. However, they find themselves both involved in helping an Arab woman who is desperate about the disappearance of her 10-year-old son. In searching for the child they discover the poor Rome suburbs inhabited by immigrants, in particular gypsies, with whom, Magda's new Islamic identity turns out very useful.

Unlike Aboulela who mainly describes observant women, Mubiayi presents young women who deal with their identity and religion in different ways. Magda and Hayat are symbols of two different typologies of young European Muslim women. If the first is in search of her Muslim identity and an Islamic worldview, the second is in search of a total identification with the country where she has grown up. It does not seem the writer prefers one model to the other. During my interview with Mubiayi, she explained, "My idea was just to show the two main trends inside the new generations. On one hand there is complete standardization, which comes from the idea that to be accepted it is necessary to be like the others. The girl who wants to become a police officer represents that. She needs to be member of an institution which represents, at its height, institutionalization. On the other hand, the girl who decides to wear the *hijab*,

[19] A. Sethi, *op. cit.*.

characterizes the opposite trend. She does not want to assimilate into Italian society, and on the contrary, she challenges it, including the leftist movements, who fight against injustice. In this sense the *hijab* is not constricting, but a manner in which to fight"[20]. After having spent her adolescence fighting for immigrants' rights, Magda suddenly turns her life and her socio-political engagement into an Islamic framework. The discovery of religion is not a return to her Egyptian roots, but, as for Aboulela's characters, it is the discovery of a new Islam in Europe. The religion that Magda finds in Italy transcends geographical boundaries and allows her to belong not to one state but to a transnational community. She participates actively in the construction of this Islamic ummah, and the same passion she expressed in her previous struggles, is now directed towards the construction of her Muslim identity.

In addition, it is interesting to notice that in Mubiayi's short story we can find the dialectic between Islam and Marxism/Left also seen in Aboulela's fiction. However in "Concorso" there is a kind of continuity in the way in which Magda performs both Islam and Communism. Regarding her sister's conduct after she turned to Islam, Mubiayi lets Hayat declare, "E quel rigore da partito comunista dei bei tempi. Duri e puri. Sempre." (p.117: "And that severity like the Communist party of the old good days")[21]. So, in this tale Islam and Communism do not seem to be two self-excluding worlds. During the interview, Mubiayi said: "I do not see a contradiction between being leftist and wearing the hijab".

The hijab issue plays an important role in this short story, as in Aboulela's *Minaret*. Throughout the story, Mubiayi deals with this controversial topic. Magda chooses to wear the hijab herself; there is no father forcing her. In fact, in the tale there are no important male characters. It is a completely female world. When Magda decides to wear the headscarf, her mother and sister are surprised, yet annoyed. In "Concorso" Hayat says, "Insomma, siamo musulmane. Nate e cresciute a Roma (tranne mia madre). Ma sempre musulmane. Mia madre è arrivata qui giovanissima, ma al Cairo le avevano insegnato le nozioni fondamentali della sottomissione ad Allah e al Suo Profeta (a questo punto dovrei dire che la pace sia su di lui, ma lo do per scontato) e i Cinque Pilastri. [...] Il problema, però è che quando mia madre viveva al Cairo si era determinata una congiuntura astrale tale che il suo paese non era propriamente dedito a queste cose. C'erano affari più urgenti: nazionalizzazione, alfabetizzazione, guerra al sionismo, quella che allora si riteneva l' "eterna" oscillazione tra russi e americani e che poi si è rivelata limitata nel tempo (adesso è difficile oscillare). Insomma non si poteva pensare troppo a quello che c'era scritto nel "Libro", con tutto rispetto, perché c'erano grandi cose da fare, c'era tutto un futuro da inventare. [...] Quindi, sì le preghiere, sì il digiuno, certamente l'elemosina rituale, ma il velo! Al massimo un delicato foulard di seta finissima con colori alla moda buttato con estrema cura sulla testa a proteggere dalla brezza notturna del Lungonilo l'opera del *coiffeur* e le spalle scoperte. Il velo, quello vero, quello che ti fa quel bell'ovale che agli arabi ricorda il manto stellato che avvolge le luna, quello era roba da ultracinquantenni. [...] Quindi a mia madre, legata a quell'immagine del velo, fa un po' strano che la figlia venticinquenne sia tutta bardata

[20] I interviewed Ingy Mubiayi on November 21st, 2006.
[21] This translation and the following ones of "Concorso" are rough translations of Ingy Mubiayi's work that I did to help non-Italian readers understand the text.

come sua nonna". (pp.111-112, "We are Muslim, born in Rome (except my mother), but we are nevertheless Muslim. My mother came here very young, but when she was living in Cairo they taught her the basic notions of submission to Allah and His Prophet (now I should to say 'peace be upon Him', but I take it for granted) and the Five Pillars [...] But the question is when my mother was living in Cairo it was an astral conjunction which didn't allow the country to be involved in this kind of thing. In those times there were more pressing affairs: nationalization, literacy, war against Zionism, and also the supposed 'eternal' struggle between the Russians and the Americans, which in the end turned out to be limited. So, it was impossible to think too much about what was written in the *Book*, because there were important things to do. There was a future to invent. [...] Therefore, it is fine to pray, to fast. That's fine - the ritual alms, but the hijab! At most, it's a small fringed silk scarf worn on the head to shield the hairdresser's work and protect the naked shoulders from the breeze of the Nile. The real hijab, an oval-shaped scarf, that reminds Arabs of the starry blanket around the moon, that was for old people. [...] For this reason my mother, who grew up with this image of the hijab, is surprised that her 25-year-old daughter dresses up like her grandmother").

For Mubiayi, the issue of the veil is very complex and important. Throughout her tale she offers the different positions, in favor and adverse to it. In our interview, she said, "the character of the veiled girl occurs for two reasons. The first reflects the sudden choice of my mother to wear the hijab, just before 9/11. It was a personal choice, at a really hard time for Muslims. So, I started to think about it, because the hijab wasn't usual in our home. We had never considered wearing it before. The second reason concerns the reading of a short French novel called *Lettre à ma fille qui veut porter le voile* (*Letter to my Daughter who Wants to wear the Veil*), by Leila Djitli. This book is a letter written by a mother with a revolutionary past who feels herself betrayed by her daughter who wants to wear the headscarf. When I read the book I thought about the fact that sometimes the ways of fighting can change. After what happened in France, I thought that speaking about the hijab was important. After all, the headscarf doesn't really necessarily have such an important meaning. I see my cousins, and I understand how the hijab is about fashion; it is an accessory, just worn to look like others, without any religious or politic meaning. Yet, of course, for some the hijab has a religious or political meaning."

However Mubiayi understands the positions of whose are critical of it. At the beginning of "Concorso", Hayat is disappointed with her sister's choice of wearing the hijab, and only at the end she does not find it so awful, in contrast with her life in Rome. Magda, in fact, is totally at ease with her headscarf. She has no difficulty in positioning herself between the Italian and Islamic cultures. During the dinner to celebrate the retrieval of the missing boy, Hayat says, "Guardo mia sorella mentre racconta entusiasta del recupero della tradizione culinaria romana attraverso la ricetta di verza e raza e mi accorgo che il suo foulard è... grazioso"(p. 137 "I look at my sister while she is telling me about her rediscovery of Italian cooking tradition and I notice her veil is... nice"). Such as in *Minaret* and *The Translator*, the hijab in "Concorso" does not prevent women from being modern and observant at the same time. Indeed, the veil, Islam and Islamic rituals also are resolving in several circumstances. For example, during the first meeting with the missing child's weeping mother, Magda's intervention is decisive. Mubiayi writes, "In due parole le dico cosa sono riuscita a capire: cioè niente. Lei allora

si siede accanto alla donna e cosa fa? Comincia a recitare versetti coranici! È proprio matta! Questa è disperata e lei si mette a recitare il Corano, magari ora le dice che deve sottomettersi all'Altissimo. Mia sorella però mi indica con il dito di fare silenzio. E dopo qualche istante anche la donna la segue nella nenia, smettendo di piangere e di tremare"(p.124 "She sits near the woman and starts to repeat the Quranic verses. She is completely crazy! This is desperate and she recites the Qur'ran. Maybe she will tell her to subdue to the Highest. But my sister signals to me to be silent. And after a while the woman starts to pray and stops crying.") In addition, when the situation becomes threatening for the two girls in an unknown poor neighborhood, Magda knows what to do, mixing Italian know-how and Islamic culture. Hayat says, "Santa mia sorella e santo Corano! Magda comincia la sua opera di persuasione, che è più infida di un procuratore finanziario. Un versetto, un'informazione data, una richiesta, un luogo comune, un dato di fatto, e l'uomo è ai suoi piedi. La chiama, figlia, sorella, poi madre [...] A quel punto può fare di lui quello che vuole. Ma si accontenta di assicurarsi che se ne vada in pace", (p.128 "For God's sake! Magda is trying to persuade the people. She is more vicious than a merchant banker. A verse, a piece of information, a request, and in the end, the man is at her feet. He calls her, daughter, sister and then mother [...] At that point she can do whatever she wants. But she contents herself making sure he can go in peace").

Hence Mubiayi draws a portrait of a young Italian Muslim woman who is both religious and modern, able to make her Islamic and Italian life coexist. Magda is not only a zealous believer, but she takes action. She is fearless and knows how to function in dangerous situations. Toward the end of the story, Hayat says, "Ho un'illuminazione: ma non sarà che mia sorella usa il velo e tutto l'armamentario come cavallo di Troia? Non si sarà mica infiltrata nella comunità per creare una quinta colonna e fare la rivoluzione dall'interno?" (p.133) "I had an ephiphany - is my sister wearing her hijab as a Trojan horse? Is it possible she infiltrated the community creating a fifth column to start the revolution from the inside?". It seems to me important to recognize in Mubiayi's work traces of Islamic feminism. In particular these lines are reminiscent of a quote by Ziba Mir Hosseini, an eminent Islamic feminist: "Who is to say if the key that unlocks the cage might not lie hidden inside the cage?"[22]. Mubiayi does not define herself an Islamic feminist, nor is she very familiar with Islamic feminist theories. After all, in Italy the Islamic feminist movement is not well known. So, why do Mubiayi's characters talk in this way? She sees that many women around her are fighting for justice and rights inside an Islamic framework, and finds necessary to describe these challenges to Italian readers. She understands that after so many years of the women's struggle to separate church and state, and to decrease the power of religion in everyday life, many Muslims today claim that religion, is the main instrument of female liberation and empowerment rather than an obstacle preventing emancipation. These women base themselves on the conviction that Islam does not justify patriarchy, and the Koran re-read from a gender perspective can liberate women changing their current status. Several scholars and activists call this women's rights movement inside an Islamic framework, Islamic feminism. This, I argue, is echoed in Mubiayi's work. In fact, as we see in Magda's character, Mubiayi shows us that a way for women's empowerment can be found inside Islam. In doing this, as many Islamic feminists do, she denies the idea

[22] Z. Mir-Hosseini, "The quest for gender justice: emerging feminist voices in Islam" in WLUML, 2004.

that westernization is the only way to free Muslim women. Criticizing Western stereotypes and Islamist orthodoxy alike, Mubiayi seems to suggest a possible conciliation between secular and religious feminisms. Hayat and Magda, second generation immigrants, empower themselves in Italy in two different ways not exclusive of each other. In "Concorso" Hayat and her mother worry because Magda becomes very observant. Critical toward her religiousity which they consider old fashioned, they do not understand her. However, their positions change. All three, Hayat, Magda and the mother, despite their differences, find themselves fighting for a common goal, to find the missing child. In the search everyone brings her own personality and manner to be female in Italy and Europe. By "Concorso" Mubiayi emphasizes the possibility of having a Muslim identity in Italy in different ways and suggests that these can be focused on. Without choosing an ideal, the author emphasizes the strength of combined efforts to find a place where Muslim women can fight for their rights using distinct feminist strategies. Finally, "Concorso" ends with the image of the three women talking in their large bathroom. It is a return to a deep intimacy where each woman can be herself physically and emotionally.

Finally, Mubiayi leaves the reader to decide about what is the best path for Muslim women in Europe. When I asked Mubiayi if she identified with one of the two sisters, her answer was, "I don't think so. I think they are two extremes and between them there are many steps. Certainly there is something of both in me, but it is difficult to say what it is". Like Magda and Hayat, Mubiayi considers herself Italian. She has lived in Rome since she was four years old, and Italy is the world in which she lives her dual affinity. She emigrated to Rome, Italy, with her family in 1977 where she grew up and attended both French and Italian schools. After earned a degree in History of Arabic Civilization at the University la Sapienza in Rome, she has opened a library in Primavalle, a suburb of Rome where she lives with her partner. In 2004 she won the prize for the short story "Documenti prego" (Documents, please)[23]. In the anthology of immigrant women's writing, *Pecore nere*, (Black Ships), where "Concorso" and "Documenti prego" were published it is written, "Ingy Mubiayi, if she hadn't been born in Cairo from an Egyptian mother and a Zairean father she would be the perfect daughter of the northern suburb of Rome"[24].

Finally, though Leila Aboulela and Engy Mubiayi are authors with very different biographies, literary productions, languages in which they write and country settings of their stories, I argue that both contribute significantly to the construction of the image of Muslim women in Europe. The two writers, in fact, oppose the marginalization of European Muslim women's claims, giving voice to female characters who embrace Islam to empower themselves.

I do not juge the literary value of Leila Aboulela's novels or the personal choices of her characters. Nor do I judge Ingy Mubiayi's writings. I am interested in the socio-antropological side of their works. *Minaret*, *The Translator* and "Concorso" aid in the understanding of how the repositioning of religion functions in the public sphere in Europe and show how women play a prominent role in this process. Aboulela and

[23] I. Mubiayi, "Documenti prego", in G. Kuruvilla *et al., op. cit.*, pp. 97-107.
[24] I. Mubiayi, "Concorso", in G. Kuruvilla *et al., op. cit.*, p. 96.

Mubiayi do not speak in the name of all Muslim women, they just add voices and perspectives that make European readers more familiar with female paths in an Islamic framework. By reaching a wide public and not only specialist readers or scholars, these writers have the benefit of letting Europeans, Muslim and non-Muslim, come to terms with women's choices that are stigmatized and misunderstood, particularly, after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Through these works we finally get a women worldview unknown to most people and see observant Muslim women in their private and public lives. As a result, we discover women who have multiple belongings. They are Muslim, European and modern at the same time.

Also Aboulela and Mubiayi have multiple and fluid identities. It is difficult to say exactly who they are or where they come from. Aboulela, who is observant, was born in Egypt of an Egyptian mother and a Sudanese father. She grew up in Sudan, where she attended American schools. Later she moved to Britain and Scotland, then to Indonesia and the Emirates. Mubiayi, who is not observant, was born in Egypt of an Egyptian mother and a Zairian father. She moved to Italy when she was 4. The first language she spoke was Arabic. The first language she wrote in was French. Her short stories are written in Italian. Both of them express their Islamic womanhood through multiple discourses and multiple speaking positions[25].

Through Sammar, Najwa and Magda, the two authors draw portraits of Muslim women who show the necessity of discussing categories of identity, women's agency, bodily form, political imaginary for better understanding how women can and do empower themeselves through Islam in contemporary Europe and elsewhere. Lastly, reading *Minaret*, *The Translator* and "Concorso" is, an invitation to re-think some feminist analysis in order to open space to new discussions able to catch the changes that are in the act. In fact, in the face of the emergence of these new Muslim women's identities, traditional feminist interpretation can remain, as Mahmood showed, "encumbered by the binary terms of resistance and subordination, and ignores projects, discourses, and desires that are not captured by these terms[26]". Indeed, more and more women maintain that the way towards emancipation and the achievement of rights does not necessarily have to include accepting western feminist ideology, but can be obtained through the acceptance and re-interpretation of one's cultural tradition[27]. So for many Muslim women to turn to religion is not a return to the past, it is an expression of individual and collective re-invention. It is a strategy of relation with the modernity that does not exclude the participation to the modern self. We can call this claim Islamic feminism, or not, it does not matter to this discussion. What is important is that these women create a new paradigm of Islamic womanhood that challenge on the one hand Western stereotypes about the supposed universal submissiveness of Muslim women to men and

[25] For a discussion of the categories of multiple belongings see M. Badran and M. Cooke (Eds), *Opening the Gates. An Anthology of Arab Feminist Writing*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2004; M. Cooke, *Women claim Islam*. New York-London, Routledge, 2001.
[26] S. Mahmood, *op. cit.*, p. 15.
[27] L. Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam. Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, New Haven, London, Yale University Press, 1992.

the patriarchal nature of the religion, and on the other hand Islamic conservatism that forbids women from being visibile in the public sphere.[28]

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