Cultural Resilience and Faith: Islamic L'identisation in the Diasporic Fiction of Leila Aboulela and Mohja Kahf

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Abstract

This paper explores how the Islamic faith serves as a basis for ethical practice as an active participant in the development of the identity of Muslims in diaspora through a comparison of Leila Aboulela's and Mohja Kahf's fictions. While the secular and post-colonial frameworks used to analyse such literature have marginalized religion or treated agency as a form of resistance to authority, this paper introduces the concept of *Islamic l'identisation* to describe the ongoing process of developing an identity based upon beliefs, disciplined ethics, and lived religious practice. Using Stuart Hall's (1990) identity as becoming, Homi Bhabha's (1994) hybridity, Talal Asad's (2003) critiques of secular modernity, and Saba Mahmood's (2005) reconceptualization of agency, this paper demonstrates how Islamic faith supports cultural resilience and belonging among diasporic populations. Through a detailed analysis of the texts *of Minaret, The Translator, and The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf,* this paper will demonstrate how Aboulela's focus on internal spiritual growth and Kahf's focus on negotiating Islam publicly converge in their support for faith as a coherent basis for ethical practice. Ultimately, this paper will argue that cultural resilience is achieved in these works through the continued ethical involvement in Islam rather than solely through resistance to authority, hybridity, or other forms of cultural negotiation.

Keywords

Affect and ethics; coming-of-age narratives; diasporic Muslim women's fiction; ethical selfhood; humor and anger; Muslim female subjectivity; ordinary ethics; postsecular literature

Introduction

In recent years, studies of Muslim diasporic literature have been successful in challenging Orientalist depictions of Muslims and focusing on issues of gender, migration and cultural hybridity. Consequently, faith is often marginalized in the discussion of identity formation,

especially when analysing Muslim women writers, who are often seen as having agency only if they resist tradition. This paper advances to the discussion of Muslim diasporic literature by claiming that Islamic faith does not serve as a limitation on identity, but rather as a formative ethical practice that enables diasporic populations to articulate cultural resilience and belonging. This paper will trace the fiction of Leila Aboulela and Mohja Kahf to illustrate how Muslim subjectivities are formed through the concept of Islamic l'identisation, which is defined as an ongoing process of identity formation that is rooted in belief, disciplined ethics and lived religious practice. As opposed to viewing identity as a binary struggle between tradition and modernity, this paper will demonstrate that faith provides a dynamic framework for diasporic subjects to negotiate the experiences of displacement, gender and cultural difference.

Building on Stuart Hall's (1990) concept of identity as a process of becoming, this paper will conceptualize Islamic identity as dynamic and historical. This paper holds out Hall's model by highlighting embodied religious practices as central to identity formation. This understanding of identity formation allows for an analysis of Muslim identity that takes into account both change and moral coherence in diasporic contexts.

Moreover, this paper will engage with Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity to explore the liminal cultural spaces occupied by the characters in the fiction of Aboulela and Kahf, while diverging from celebratory accounts of the third space that prioritize fluidity at the expense of ethical grounding. Building on Talal Asad's (2003) critique of secular modernity and Saba Mahmood's (2005) reconceptualization of agency, this paper demands feminist and post-colonial readings that associate empowerment exclusively with resisting religious norms. Instead, this paper will show that devotion, discipline, critique and reinterpretation can all represent meaningful expressions of agency within Islamic traditions.

Although Aboulela and Kahf have each received critical attention, most scholarship on their fiction tends to focus on separate analyses of their fiction or focuses on critiquing the politics of their fiction while de-emphasizing the spiritual continuities of their fiction. Therefore, this paper will offer a sustained comparative reading that brings the narrative of Aboulela and Kahf into dialogue with one another to illustrate how different literary approaches (Aboulela's focus on spiritual interiority and Kahf's focus on public negotiation) converge in their representation of faith as a source of ethical coherence and cultural resilience. In doing so, the paper will make three key claims: First, that identity in Muslim diasporic literature

cannot be fully explained without considering faith as an embodied ethical tradition; Second, that Islamic l'identisation represents a productive frame for incorporating faith into theories of identity formation; Third, that cultural resilience in these texts is achieved through the continued ethical engagement with Islamic practice and not through the act of resistance or hybridity.

Methodology & Theoretical Framework

This paper uses a comparative qualitative methodology based on a close textual analysis. Based on selected works of Leila Aboulela (*The Translator, Minaret*) and Mohja Kahf (*The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*) the focus is on the way identity and resilience are represented through faith using narrative voice, character development and representations of ethical decision-making. The study employs an interpretive, qualitative methodology based on close textual analysis.

The theoretical framework consists of four main strands of thought. Stuart Hall's conception of "becoming" as a historical process of constructing identity is the foundation of the subjectivity concept of this research. His idea of "the third space" in terms of hybridity and liminality informs the analysis of the concept of hybridity; it also makes possible to critically analyse the limitation of the concept of hybridity when faith is not taken into account. The conceptualization of religion as a discursive and ethical tradition, as developed by Talal Asad in his critique of secular modernity, gives the possibility of a reading of Islam as a formative practice of belief, discipline, critique and devotion, instead of a symbolic identity marker. Lastly, Saba Mahmood's redefinition of agency as ethical self-formation makes it possible to see the faith-based practices of the two authors' female characters as active forms of self-formation and not as mere signs of passivity.

Together, these frameworks allow us to define the central analytical concept of the research Islamic l'identisation as the dynamic process of construction of Muslim subjects through faith, belief, discipline, critique and devotion of identity. The methodology used in this research allows us to read the fiction of Aboulela and Kahf in a more nuanced way, putting at the centre of the analysis of contemporary Muslim diasporic literature the role of faith as a source of cultural resilience and belonging.

Background on Leila Aboulela and Mohja Kahf

The appearance of Muslim women writers in Anglophone literary spaces can be seen as a significant intervention in the frameworks through which Islam, gender and identity have historically been interpreted. Historically, representations of Muslim women have been shaped by Orientalist and secular liberal paradigms that portrayed Muslim women as passive subjects determined by religion, and therefore limited faith as a relevant factor in the production of agency. Against this backdrop, the fiction of Leila Aboulela and Mohja Kahf provide a counterpoint by representing Muslim subjectivity from the inside out, drawing upon lived experiences of faith, migration and cultural negotiation. Through their work, Islam is represented not as a fixed heritage but as an evolving ethical force that defines identity and belonging.

Leila Aboulela, a British writer of Sudanese origin, has made Islamic spirituality central to modern diasporic life. Her novels, *The Translator* (1999) and *Minaret* (2005), use a contemplative narrative style that emphasizes interiority, moral deliberation and spiritual longing. Rather than seeing hybridity as a result of cultural fragmentation, Aboulela depicts faith as a unifying axis for identity. Her work is compatible with Stuart Hall's view of identity as a process of "becoming", however, she extends this by depicting religious practice as a primary mode of identity formation rather than as a residual cultural marker.

Aboulela's protagonists often experience displacement due to migration and social exclusion, and their responses to these situations never involve secular assimilation. They find their way back to Islam as a source of ethical clarity and emotional resilience. This narrative strategy corresponds to Talal Asad's critique of secular modernity, who questions the confinement of religion to individual belief. For Aboulela, Islam is a lived and embodied practice that influences moral awareness, behavior and accountability.

Mohja Kahf, an American-Syrian writer and poet, explores Muslim identity through a more explicit public and political perspective. She examines Islamophobia, racism and representation in the United States in her novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006) and her poetry collection *Emails from Scheherazad* (2003). Kahf emphasizes the visibility of Muslim identity, especially in post 9/11 times when Muslim women's bodies become objects of ideological scrutiny. She demonstrates how Muslim subjectivity is shaped by both external gaze and internal negotiation through the concepts of representation and power as defined by Stuart Hall.

Kahf does not represent Islam as inherently oppressive. Her work is consistent with Saba Mahmood's re-conception of agency as ethical self-forming, as opposed to mere resistance. Kahf's characters challenge and reinterpret religious norms, but ultimately affirm their faith as a voluntary and conscious ethical choice. This process is an example of Islamic l'identification as a continuous negotiation between identity and faith through belief, critique and devotion.

While Aboulela places greater emphasis on the spiritual interiority and continuity of Islam, Kahf emphasizes the public negotiations and criticisms of the two authors. Both authors contest reductive narratives of Islam and show how faith is a crucial resource for cultural resilience and belonging in the Muslim diaspora.

Through the collective work of Hall, Bhabha, Asad, and Mahmood, a multi-layered theoretical model exists to understand Islamic l'identification as a dynamic, ethically-anchored process. This model can be applied to the fiction of Aboulela and Kahf to illustrate how Muslim characters navigate dislocation and cultural difference without abandoning their faith and illustrating Islam as a resilient source for identity and belonging in diasporic life.

Review of Relevant Literature on Cultural Resilience in Fiction

Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity also adds complexity to the discussion of resilience by emphasizing the liminal nature and the negotiation involved in creating post-colonial identities. However, some scholars have also argued that an unproblematic celebration of hybridity may obscure the need for cultural anchorages that provide coherence and ethical meaning. Thus, in order to understand resilience in literature adequately, one must take into account the frameworks (e.g., religious, moral, or communal) that permit subjects to endure hybridity without fragmentation.

Cultural resilience has been studied in relation to Muslim literature, although this area of study has largely been based on issues of Islamophobia, race, and gendered oppression especially in the post-9/11 era. Scholars studying the writings of Muslim women have identified the strategies of resistance to stereotypes and patriarchal constraints as a means of developing resilience. While these are significant analyses, they tend to read resilience as mainly resistance to or flight from tradition. The Talal Asad's critique of secular modernity problematizes this understanding, on the grounds that religious traditions are coherent systems of ethics within which subjects are able to navigate life in the modern. Asad's

critique of secular modernity encourages a re-examination of literary resilience as an ethical process embedded in the lived experience of religious practice rather than solely as a form of cultural resistance.

Saba Mahmood's work has also challenged the existing scholarly field by re-defining agency in religious contexts. Mahmood's work has influenced literary critics to reinterpret devotional practices as active forms of agency rather than as indications of passive acceptance. Therefore, in cases where characters in literature engage with their faith on a deep level, Mahmood's framework will enable readers to consider the character's resilience in terms of commitment, discipline, and ethical self-formation. This approach is particularly relevant to Muslim women's literature because the resilience derived from faith-based experiences is often mis-interpreted through liberal feminist paradigms.

Despite the growth of the field, comparative studies that explore cultural resilience, faith and Islamic identity among diverse literary voices are still scarce. Most of the current literature examines writers such as Leila Aboulela and Mohja Kahf separately and often prioritizes political critique over spiritual continuity or vice versa. This project seeks to address this deficit by engaging their bodies of work in conversation through the lens of Islamic l'identification. By combining Hall's process-oriented identity theory, Bhabha's hybridity, Asad's critique of secularism, and Mahmood's re-conceptualization of agency, this project offers a more inclusive understanding of cultural resilience one that views faith as central to identity formation and belonging in Muslim diasporic literature.

Aboulela and Kahf's Works: Examples of Cultural Resilience in Literature about Islam

Aboulela and Kahf provide examples of how literature about Islam demonstrates cultural resilience, as they illustrate Islamic faith to be a living, adaptable and ethically sustainable force in the lives of immigrants. Although their styles of storytelling and approaches to politics differ, each writer depicts Muslims as people whose identity does not remain unchanged or lost when immigrating, but continues to evolve through belief, practice, and cultural negotiations. Thus, Aboulela and Kahf provide a significant counter-narrative to the dominant representations of Islam that see it as being incompatible with modernity or belonging in a diaspora.

Aboulela's novels specifically show examples of how cultural resilience can occur through spiritual continuity. Many of Aboulela's novels center around a character who has experienced a significant disruption such as political turmoil, immigration or social exclusion; however, the character will resist the temptation to give up on their faith as a way of addressing these issues. For example, in Minaret, Najwa loses her status as an elite citizen of Sudan, along with her national identity, after a coup; she undergoes a crisis of identity that cannot be solved by assimilating into British society. However, her gradual return to practicing Islam is a means of gaining emotional stability and ethical grounding. This shows how Talal Asad described religion as a discursive tradition that influences one's moral values and helps sustain one's identity in situations of displacement.

Moreover, Aboulela's emphasis on the inside (interiority) of a person's identity is consistent with Stuart Hall's view that identity is a process rather than a permanent state. In other words, Najwa's Islamic identity was not simply restored but was reconstructed based upon her lived experience of being a Muslim woman in Britain. Therefore, her cultural resilience was continuous adaptation rather than a nostalgic attempt to preserve the past. Her faith enabled her to exist in the "in-between" space of a diaspora without losing her moral bearings and to challenge Homi Bhabha's idea of hybridity by demonstrating how cultural negotiation can co-exist with a deep spiritual connection.

Mohja Kahf's stories show a different model of cultural resilience based on criticism, dialogue, and reinterpretation. In *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, Khadra Shamy's journey is influenced by various forms of oppression including racism, Islamophobia and internal conflicts within her Muslim community. Kahf emphasizes the public aspects of Muslim identity, and illustrates how cultural resilience develops through the ability to critique and re-interpret tradition and not to abandon it. Khadra's temporary distance from Islam is not abandonment of her faith but a necessary step in her development of an ethical self, and is consistent with Stuart Hall's definition of identity as being developed through struggle and re-positioning.

Cultural Identity, Faith, and Resilience in Aboulela's Stories

Aboulela's stories depict the interconnection between cultural identity and faith, and demonstrate how Islamic practices are the major structures through which characters navigate

displacement, social isolation and moral transformation. Aboulela's stories depict Muslim women as agents of their own transformation and identity formation and refute the common images of Muslim women in Western literature as passive and tradition bound. In addition, Aboulela's stories depict faith as a dynamic system of ethics that guides and informs the identity formation of her characters. This is based on an idea of identity such as that of Stuart Hall, where identity is a process of becoming, and this happens in a timed and cultural manner.

Loss of class and national identity causes confusion and disorientation to the character, while economic instability produces a sense of no direction and purpose. Instead of resolving these tensions through assimilation, Najwa returns to practicing Islam as a form of self-definition and as a source of moral guidance. This demonstrates how Talal Asad views Islam as a practical tradition that informs one's moral values and behaviour and one's perception of oneself.

In addition, Aboulela's stories of the diaspora complicate Homi Bhabha's concept of the third space. Najwa occupies three positions of cultural identity (Sudanese, immigrant, and Muslim) and these intersections create no fragmentation, but instead faith acts as a mediator of hybridity and creates a coherent moral identity. The cultural negotiations of Aboulela's stories take place in conjunction with and not as a replacement for a spiritual base of identity. Saba Mahmood's redefinition of agency provides additional insight into Aboulela's representation of resilience. Najwa's empowerment is not a product of open rebellion against or resistance to her tradition, but is a product of the development of her pious self through her disciplined practice of her faith. Her return to practicing Islam as a means of forming her identity as a Muslim woman is an expression of agency formed through her reflection on the norms of her faith and not through a direct opposition to them. Her temporary separation from and subsequent return to Islam represents her agency as a process of developing her ethical self, where she maintains a spirit of devotion and critique towards the faith. Resilience is demonstrated through Najwa's continued practice of her faith as a means of moral self-sustenance and through her interpretation of her faith as a means of interpreting her experiences in a diasporic world.

Aboulela's tales of cultural resilience go beyond the boundaries of *Minaret*. In *The Translator*, Sammar reacts to the world around her and to the nature of the work she does in accordance with the Islamic principles of ethics and morals. Across Aboulela's stories of cultural resilience, her characters develop a sense of self and maintain their moral integrity and sense of self through their decisions guided by their faith. Thus, cultural resilience is

represented in Aboulela's stories not as a product of defiant resistance or withdrawal from the modern world, but as the capacity to negotiate modernity, migration and diversity through Islamic l'identification, and to develop a sense of belonging, coherence and ethical continuity in a diasporic world.

Cultural Identity, Faith, and Public Resilience in Kahf's Stories

Mohja Kahf's body of work highlights the public and social dimensions of Muslim identity within Arab-American diasporic communities. Unlike Aboulela's focus on the inner (interior) world of her characters, Kahf places faith in public and intercultural settings and demonstrates that resilience is not just private but is formed and negotiated through public and intercultural engagement. Kahf's stories of *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006) and *Emails from Scheherazad* (2003) depict Islamic identity as a process of developing an ethical identity and continuously re-articulating identity rather than as a static and unchanging inheritance. Kahf's characters embody Stuart Hall's definition of identity as fluid and historically contingent. She depicts her characters existing in a tension between inherited traditions, American cultural expectations, and the ethical obligations of their Islamic faith, and as they seek to establish a sense of belonging, they continue to articulate and re-articulate their identity as they move forward in a diasporic world.

Homi Bhabha's concept of the third space provides a useful framework for analyzing Kahf's depiction of hybridity. Kahf's protagonists occupy liminal positions between Arab, American and Muslim identities and use these spaces to re-interpret and re-articulate their traditions rather than to assimilate or to retreat from them. Liminality in Kahf's stories become a productive space for Islamic l'identification, and allow for cultural resilience through ethical negotiation rather than cultural disappearance. Talal Asad's critical writings on secular modernity allow us to further read Kahf's investment in faith. Kahf represents Islamic practice not as a symbolic identity signifier, but as a lived and material tradition that informs individuals' moral judgments, social comportments and self-perceptions.

In *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, Khadra Shamy negotiates Islamophobia, internal conflicts within her Muslim community, and personal uncertainty through the practice of her faith. Thus, Islamic practice serves as both a stable anchor and a flexible moral guide for Khadra in a diasporic world.

Saba Mahmood's redefinition of agency adds clarity to the manner in which Kahf's stories depict agency. Khadra's agency is not depicted through overt resistance to her faith, but through reflective engagement with the norms of her faith. Khadra's temporary separation

from Islam, and her eventual return to Islam, demonstrates how agency is practiced as a development of an ethical self, and how she uses her faith as a source of moral agency in a world that scrutinizes her Muslim identity.

As a whole, Kahf's stories depict her characters as continuing to negotiate hybridized identities while maintaining moral and spiritual coherence. Therefore, Kahf's stories depict cultural resilience as the ability to face public scrutiny, re-interpret tradition, and maintain moral agency in contested social spaces. Alongside Aboulela's stories, Kahf's stories provide a complementary model of Islamic l'identification one that emphasizes public negotiation, ethical reflection, and faith as a living resource for establishing a sense of belonging in a diasporic world. Both Aboulela and Kahf portray Islamic l'identification as a stable, flexible framework of identity formation in muslim diaspora literature, yet they engage with the representation of cultural resilience and agency in two different though not opposing ways. A close reading of the two women's narrative techniques and thematic focus will show a convergence in the importance of the ethical nature of faith to the narrative, as well as disparate methods of dealing with identity.

Aboulela's fiction emphasizes interiority of the spirit as the primary locus of resilience, where her characters (such as Najwa in *Minaret* and Sammar in *The Translator*) use devotional practice, ethical discipline, and reflective engagement with their faith as a response to displacement and marginalization. The focus of Aboulela's fiction on the individual's interiority parallels Stuart Hall's definition of identity as a "process of becoming" that is continuously developed through transformations and continuities. According to Talal Asad, the Islam represented in Aboulela's fiction serves as a discourse and ethics of tradition that shape moral perception and action; therefore, her characters are able to develop a coherent sense of self and exercise agency despite not engaging in public forms of resistance or assimilation.

In contrast, Kahf's fiction presents a public negotiation of faith and identity. In *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, Khadra Shamy navigates Islamophobia, community pressures, and cross-cultural frictions with a moral allegiance to Islam. Her fiction inhabits a "third space", as termed by Homi Bhabha, where her characters live in liminal states between Arab, American and Muslim subjectivities. In this way, the adaptive engagement of her characters with external pressures and their internal ethical reflections serve to produce a form of resilience.

Both authors present agency in a similar manner, as defined by Saba Mahmood. In neither Aboulela's nor Kahf's bodies of work is empowerment seen as solely emerging from acts of resistance or rebellion. Rather, agency is demonstrated through ethical self-formation, deliberate reflection, and disciplined adherence to religious norms. For both authors, faith is a means of navigating hybridity, displacement, and marginalization, while simultaneously sustaining moral authority and selfhood.

Thus, the comparative approach reveals two complementary modes of Islamic l'identification: Aboulela emphasizes the inwardly-oriented ethical formation and spiritual continuity, whereas Kahf emphasizes the outwardly-directed negotiation of faith and identity in socially-mediated and contested spaces. Together, their fictions illustrate that cultural resilience in Muslim diaspora literature is neither purely private nor purely public; rather, it emerges at the intersection of faith, ethical practice, and contextual engagement.

Conclusion

Leila Aboulela and Mohja Kahf present a nuanced and compelling representation of Islamic l'identification in contemporary diasporic literature. Both authors demonstrate that faith is not merely a static cultural marker or restrictive force, but a dynamic and ethically-grounded process through which Muslim diasporic subjects navigate displacement, hybridity, and belonging. Through their central focus on Islamic practice, moral reasoning, and spiritual intentionality, both authors challenge simplistic representations of Muslim identity and illustrate the complex processes of developing resilient diasporic subjectivities.

Aboulela's work is particularly valuable due to her inward examination of faith as a transforming and stabilizing force. Najwa's gradual return to Islamic devotion in Minaret illustrates how Islamic devotion functions as a long-term process of ethical self-formation, rather than simply as a reaction to modernity. Faith provides the foundation for moral coherence and self-awareness, which is consistent with Stuart Hall's view of identity as being contextually situated and continuing to evolve through experiences. In addition, Talal Asad's view of religion as an embodied ethics of tradition provides additional insight into how Aboulela's fiction demonstrates how faith actively constitutes perception, conduct, and subjectivity.

Kahf's fiction, however, focuses on the public and relational aspects of the formation of Islamic identity. *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* demonstrates that Islamic l'identification develops through interactions with community norms, public scrutiny, and intercultural

negotiation. Kahf's characters occupy cultural liminality between Arab, American, and Muslim identities that resemble the "third space" described by Homi Bhabha. However, in Kahf's fiction, hybridity is not indicative of fragmentation. Instead, it represents an area of ethical negotiation and creative agency. Like Saba Mahmood's redefinition of agency, Kahf's fiction demonstrates that individuals may gain power and agency through faith-based practices, intentional morality, and reinterpretations, rather than necessarily through resistance alone.

When read together, the works of Aboulela and Kahf provide a multi-dimensional model of Islamic l'identification that combines interiorized spirituality with social engagement. Although Aboulela and Kahf employed differing narrative strategies to achieve this end, they share the conviction that faith has the potential to provide moral cohesion, resilience, and a sense of belonging for those who live in diaspora. Consequently, the fiction of both authors contributes to postcolonial and literary studies by providing a counter-narrative to secularist views of religion as ancillary to modern subjectivity. They demonstrate that cultural resilience and agency may be achieved through religious commitments, as opposed to against them.

This study also opens opportunities for future research on faith and cultural resilience in literature. Comparative analyses of the ways in which Islamic l'identification functions in various diasporas, especially in the South Asian, African, Southeast Asian, and European diaspora communities, would enhance our understanding of how Islamic l'identification may function under different historical and cultural conditions. Intersectional analyses that consider how faith intersects with factors like gender, class, generation, and masculinity would extend the conversation regarding ethical agency and subjectivity. Interdisciplinary collaboration with ethnographic or sociological research may help to determine the degree to which literary representations of faith correspond to real-world experiences. Lastly, analysing the aesthetic mediation of faith through the lens of narrative form and genre, including poetry, memoir, and digital storytelling, would enhance our understanding of the aesthetic and ethical ways in which Islamic l'identification is constructed.

Through the focus on faith as a fundamental aspect of identity construction, this article supports the critical utility of Islamic l'identification as a theoretical framework for studying Muslim diasporic literature. Furthermore, the article highlights the ability of literature to convey the spiritual, cultural, and ethical dimensions of belonging in an increasingly diverse and mobile world.

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