

# Her Heart Lies at the Feet of the Mother: Transformations of the Romance Plot in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*

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## <sup>1</sup>SHORT BIO

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## ABSTRACT

Sudanese-British writer, Leila Aboulela's novel, *Minaret* (2005) transforms the plot structure of Western literary and popular romance forms and develops further the plotlines of African-American Muslim romance novels. It does so by foregrounding the dissenting mother as obstruction to the union of the hero and heroine, against the backdrop of the unique status of the mother in Islam. Thus, the ending of the novel is neither happy nor tragic. Instead, the lovers are separated, and closure requires reconciliation on the part of the couple with the concerns of the mother. In addition, because of the significant difference in age, the heroine is in some ways like a mother to the hero. Final contentment of the heroine is undermined by her questionable actions at the end, resulting in psychic and spiritual contraction. The novel is therefore opened up to ambiguity and uncertainty in the closure, notwithstanding the faith of the heroine. The specific form which closure takes, is determined by the dissenting mother as obstruction in Islamic romance.

## KEYWORDS

Aboulela; romance; Islam; mother; Islamic feminism

## Introduction

Sudanese-British author, Leila Aboulela, is established in the world and commonwealth Anglophone literature networks as a writer of what has come to be termed “halal” fiction. Unlike many writers who describe themselves as “culturally” Muslim, incorporating Muslim characters and Islamic settings in their fiction, Aboulela's work is deeply informed and shaped by the Islamic ethos of a practicing Muslim. In this respect, given her prominence in contemporary world literature, Aboulela is often contrasted with Salman Rushdie, whose artistic project fundamentally undermines Islamic worldviews in all their various contemporary manifestations. Aboulela's fiction has significantly furthered literary debates around questions of translation, migrant writing, and religion in the contemporary postsecularist moment of Euramerican cultures. Since Aboulela's fictions embody powerful female subjectivities, her work has elicited an interest from a feminist perspective, especially concerning how Islamic feminism may be distinguished from feminist individualism. Even though feminist individualism may challenge some patriarchal

Enlightenment assumptions, it is epistemologically grounded in the central ideals of the European Enlightenment.

This article draws on many of these currents in Aboulela scholarship through a study of the romance plot in her second novel, *Minaret*.<sup>1</sup> This essay argues that, against the backdrop of a predominant interest in the politics of gendered romantic relationships in her oeuvre, *Minaret* engages and significantly transforms the dominant plot structures of Western literary and popular romance forms through underscoring the significance of the dissenting mother in Islamic romance. The dissenting mother in Islamic romance may represent a major obstacle to the union of beloveds. The centrality of obstruction in the romance narrative was first proposed in a Western literary and cultural context by Denis de Rougement.<sup>2</sup> However, what De Rougement proposes for Western archetypal romance narratives is cross-culturally and cross-historically true for romance narratives. Furthermore, the complexity of plotlines in African-American Muslim popular romance as discussed by Layla Abdullah-Poulos,<sup>3</sup> is developed further through the figure of the dissenting mother presented in *Minaret*. Abdullah-Poulos suggests that the popular African-American Muslim romance depends, for a successful resolution, on the existence of a “Stable Love Triangle” with God at the apex.

This essay suggests that in Muslim romance, the dissenting mother may be a major and recurring obstruction to the resolution, and that the union of the beloveds crucially depends on the mother’s approval. The “Stable Love Triangle” may therefore also need to include the mother at a point below the ultimate apex represented by God. Since the mother in *Minaret* resolutely rejects the romantic relationship to the end, closure in the novel is radically destabilised. For this reason, one may conclude that

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<sup>1</sup> Leila Aboulela, *Minaret* (New York: Black Cat, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Denis de Rougement, *Love in the Western World* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983). For De Rougement, the major romance myth which informs the Western culture is the story of Tristan and Isolde, which is a narrative about obstacles to union, finally ending in death. The Tristan myth has a precursor in the Persian romance of Vis and Ramin, and in romances from many other cultures, defined by obstructions to union.

<sup>3</sup> Layla Abdullah-Poulos, “The Stable Muslim Love Triangle – Triangular Desire in African American Muslim Romance Fiction,” *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* 7 (2018).

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Aboulela does not endorse, as a number of critics suggests, a “quietist”<sup>4</sup> resolution “lioniz[ing]...the Islamically devout and observant – against... the profane and the unbelievers.”<sup>5</sup> Instead, at its end, the novel opens up to uncertainty and ambiguity, except for the certainty of profound belief in Divine love, and the ongoing yearning for paradoxical liberation in the Divine embrace. The novel achieves this outcome by introducing the figure of the mother in the romance plot, a figure that becomes as significant as the romantic heroine herself. By foregrounding the mother, the idealisation of wish-fulfilment, conventionally achieved in the closure of the classic romance plot is necessarily relinquished. The article is informed by theories and debates in cultural-historical studies of romantic love, and examines the novel through a comparative analysis of its plot, detailed through literary close reading, which highlights elements of characterisation and linguistic style, relevant to the argument.

Aboulela’s first novel, *The Translator*<sup>6</sup> is an index of the importance that she attaches to romance. *The Translator*, more than any of Aboulela’s subsequent novels, has had the biggest impact in postcolonial and African literary circles, also being listed as one of the *New York Times*

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<sup>4</sup> Eva Hunter hesitates on the ending of *Minaret*, which sees the protagonist withdrawing into apparent spiritual self-isolation, rather than committing to outward action like Marxism or feminism. This dichotomy, I believe, is false since the withdrawal occurs in a space of doubt, and the dispelling thereof will hopefully come through the performance of the Hajj, where the rituals are a physical embodiment of Islamically modulated feminist and socialist ideals and actions. The heroine ought thereafter to “live her Hajj,” incorporating these ideals into her everyday life. See Eva Hunter, “The Muslim ‘Who Has Faith’ in Leila Aboulela’s Novels *Minaret* (2005) and *Lyrics Alley* (2009),” *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa* 25, no.1 (2013): 88-99.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Morey argues that the novel as a form has never fully been able to shed its partial origins from Christianity, therefore, incompletely becoming the cultural embodiment of secularism. For this reason, Aboulela’s attempt to communicate the experience of (Islamic monotheistic) faith, is not entirely misplaced in the novel. The “communalist” solution that Morey finds at the conclusion of the novel will cause critics less unease, he suggests, read in relation to Canadian literary scholar, Northrop Frye’s Christian-influenced theory of “archetypes.” Up to this point, the argument is persuasive. However, the assumption that the ending is “communalist,” clearly and unproblematically pitting believers against unbelievers, effaces the anguish of the protagonist who, to the end remains deeply uncertain whether she is embraced by God and whether she really is a true believer. The narrative significantly strips the heroine of any self-righteousness through exposing her fallibilities and inconsistencies at the end (Peter Morey, “Halal Fiction’ and the limits of postsecularism: Criticism, critique and the Muslim in Leila Aboulela’s *Minaret*,” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 53, no. 2 [2018]: 301-35).

<sup>6</sup> Leila Aboulela, *The Translator* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1999).

100 Most Notable Books of the Year. The genre conventions and plot of *The Translator* bring to prominence the potential that Aboulela seems to identify in romantic love to draw together diasporic subjects. Romance is heavily tasked to unite subjects in a contemporary globalised world order, which in recent decades has been sharply polarised by Islamophobia.

In *The Translator*, the young, recently widowed heroine, Sammar, acts as a translator of Arabic texts into English for Rae Isles, a Scottish Middle-Eastern historian and lecturer in postcolonial politics. However, Sammar is a translator of more than just one language into another. She translates cultures and epistemologies in her efforts to understand her Scottish hosts, and to be understood by them. She is attracted to Rae but, as a woman of Islamic faith, cannot fulfil her desires outside of marriage, and marriage is not a possibility, as Rae professes to be agnostic. Sammar's commitment to faith is such that she cannot conceive of marrying Rae unless he embraces Islam. The couple's union is achieved only at the end of the novel when Sammar transforms her desire. Her prayers no longer are selfish – for Rae to become Muslim so that she can marry him. Instead, Rae becomes Muslim for his own sake, recognising the virtues of Islam and thus bringing down the obstacle of his religious indifference that formerly divided them. The romantic union of the heroine and hero operates allegorically to suggest the potential union of the East-West, North-South, Europe-Africa divide of contemporary geo-political power imbalances. The love story in *The Translator* is the most well-known and most debated romantic relationship of the intimacies that occur in virtually all of Aboulela's works.

Emily Davis, in *Rethinking the Romance Genre: Global Intimacies in Contemporary Literary and Visual Culture* identifies a tension in the reception, particularly of postcolonial women's writings, when novels adopt the conventions of genre fiction, especially the romance plot.<sup>7</sup> Davis refers to the discussion surrounding the nomination for the 1999 Booker Prize of *The Map of Love*, Ahdaf Soueif's grand Egyptian historical "political romance," which bears many similarities to Aboulela's *The Translator*. Davis suggests:

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<sup>7</sup> Emily Davis, *Rethinking the Romance Genre: Global Intimacies in Contemporary Literary and Visual Culture* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013).

Critics' responses to the novel varied widely, but one common thread ran through nearly all of the reviews: a profound unease with the novel's combination of romance and politics. For critics, the genres of the romance and the political novel functioned as two mutually exclusive and thus irreconcilable traditions, and their reviews tended either to valorize the novel's political content and criticize its formulaic romance or to celebrate the romance as an escape from the realities of the book's political commentary and an indulgence in the guilty pleasures of mass-market fiction.<sup>8</sup>

The romance elements in Aboulela's fiction are so noticeable that some critics have analysed *The Translator* as an example of the "chick lit" subgenre of popular romance, albeit with "a resistant aesthetic that draws attention to the sexism found both in traditional cultural mores and consumer-driven neoliberal gender regimes, offering faith and spirituality as a model for more equitable gender relations."<sup>9</sup> Aboulela's work has therefore significantly broken down the divide between elitist conceptions of "serious" literature, and popular romance, exposing the dialectical and productive relations between realism and genre fiction, like romance.

Aboulela's interest in love and marriage draws her work into a constellation of writing by other African women writers, beginning in the twentieth century with the Nigerian, Flora Nwapa, and including also the Senegalese Mariama Bâ, the South African Bessie Head, the Egyptian Ahdaf Soueif, and most importantly the Ghanaian writer, Ama Ata Aidoo. Of all the writers mentioned, Aidoo is the author who reflects most consciously on the significance of love in an African socio-political context. Recognising the distinctiveness of Aboulela's literary negotiations of romantic love, no doubt, played a role in the inclusion of Aboulela as a contributing author in *African Love Stories*, the short story anthology edited by Aidoo. This anthology draws together the short fiction of many prominent African women writers.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Davis, *Rethinking the Romance Genre*, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Lucinda Newns, "Renegotiating romantic genres: Textual resistance and Muslim chick lit," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 53, no.2 (2017): 284.

<sup>10</sup> Ama Ata Aidoo suggests in his introduction that literature and its scholarship have not devoted sufficient attention to romantic love in the African context, since economic and political issues have always seemed more urgent (Ama Ata Aidoo [ed.], *African Love Stories: An Anthology* [Banbury: Ayebeia, 2012]).

Aboulela brings a vast range of traditions of romantic love into her fiction, inflecting them in ways both idiosyncratic to her personal experience and vision, but also reflecting what may be more general trends emerging in African and Islamic interpretations of eros. Aboulela clarifies the influence of the Anglo-American romance tradition through her reading of the Western classics, which formed part of her formal education. She suggests, for example, that the “courtship rituals of modern-day Muslims can be found in a Jane Austen novel.”<sup>11</sup> She elaborates further that as a teenager, she read Daphne du Maurier’s popular classic romance novel, *Rebecca*, and also *Jane Eyre*, the canonical nineteenth-century domestic romance by Charlotte Brontë. She admits to being struck by how fully Christian the romance plots of novels like *Jane Eyre* are:

In these nineteenth-century novels that I had read as a child, I noticed that Christianity was extremely embedded in the work. I still see it there, and I think that maybe other readers don’t really notice it because they take it for granted. I have often given this example of *Jane Eyre*: the plot hinges on the fact that Mr Rochester can’t marry Jane because he’s married to Bertha. He can’t even divorce Bertha. It’s one of the most un-Islamic plots that you’d ever get! And it is not secular, it is Christian in that Jane whole-heartedly believes that it is wrong for her to be Mr Rochester’s second wife, and Charlotte Bronte must kill off Bertha in order to pave the way for a happy ending. Indeed, this is Christian justice at work: Jane who is good wins everything and Mr Rochester is punished by losing his eyesight. There is a lot of faith in *Jane Eyre*, a lot of spirituality – at the same time it is specifically Christian, and reading it as a Muslim I am acutely aware of this. So, I often think that if western literature accommodated Christianity so well then perhaps it can, too, accommodate Islam. And yes I am writing back to that Anglocentric tradition which is also Christian: I am putting Islam in the English novel.<sup>12</sup>

It is therefore clear that Aboulela quite consciously adapts European romance conventions, strongly shaped by a Christian ethos, to reflect

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<sup>11</sup> Leila Aboulela, “Restraint? Sure. Oppression? Hardly,” *Washington Post*, 22 July 2007, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/07/20/AR2007072002147.html>.

<sup>12</sup> C.E. Rashid, “Islamic Individualism and the Logic of the Narrative: An Interview with Leila Aboulela,” *Interventions* 14, no.4 (2012): 619.

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Islamically informed personal relations. If Jane in *Jane Eyre* had been Muslim, the romance plot would have been influenced by an Islamic code, allowing her to marry Rochester and be the second wife without the narrative having to kill off Bertha Mason, the creole first wife. Otherwise, Rochester would have been able to divorce Bertha Mason, following the three-staged separation which seeks to ensure that a marriage, which is still viable is not sundered.

Aboulela's own novels also adapt other romance conventions within an Islamic ethos. Her work reflects a strong consciousness and transformation of the masculine postcolonial inflections of classic European tales of love. *The Translator* cites and alludes to Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*,<sup>13</sup> which rewrites Shakespeare's *Othello*, parodying the "Moorish" demon lover trope embodied in its Sudanese male protagonist. Unlike Salih's hero who wreaks revenge on white men through destroying white women, Aboulela's heroine symbolically overcomes hierarchies and divisions through loving the open-hearted "coloniser." Aboulela's narratives are also informed by, or read through the lens of the romance classics of Arab and Islamic culture. These include the tales of Yusuf (Joseph) and Zulaikha (Potiphar's wife) from the monotheistic scriptures, and Laila and Majnun from the Arab oral tradition. Aboulela herself is often likened to Scheherezade, the astute wife of King Shahriyar of *The Thousand and One Nights*, who rewrites an oppressive and violent gender script through her stories.

No doubt, Aboulela is aware of and influenced by popular romances in Arabic, as she might be of thriving Urdu popular romances in Pakistan and other predominantly Muslim countries like Malaysia, and closer to "home," the Soyayya popular romances of the Hausa of Northern Nigeria. These popular print romances have also, in part, encouraged and shaped the development of local film industries with televised romance series and films, now globally distributed through online streaming services. Many of the Muslim romance trends in Aboulela's fiction are reflected in these cultural traditions and genres, for example, explorations of the "cousin-love" and "cousin-arranged marriages," traditionally encouraged in many of these Islamic cultures. However, the scholarship of these texts and visual narratives is still in its infancy, and very little is available in an English scholarly context. The analysis of *Minaret* to follow, which foregrounds the figure of the mother, further

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<sup>13</sup> Tayeb Salih, *Season of Migration to the North* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1969).

develops the Islamic pattern privileging Divine love, identified by Abdullah-Poulos in the growing number of African-American Muslim popular romances.

### **Reading *Minaret* through the Romance Plot**

*Minaret* is a first-person realist narrative about Najwa, a Sudanese woman who finds herself in lonely penury in London in the early 2000s. The novel consists of six parts and allows the narrative to flash backwards to key moments from its present time (2003-2004) to Najwa's privileged youthful years in Khartoum as the daughter of a wealthy government minister (1984-1985), and in London, describing her family's dismal exile (1989-1991) after a Marxist coup in the Sudan in which her father is executed. As a young person in Khartoum, Najwa enjoys the social, cultural, and educational advantages of the postcolonial elite throughout the developing world. These are lost when Najwa, her mother, and twin brother, Omar have to flee to London after her father is hanged. The family manages to retain a semblance of middle-class comfort for a while. However, the mother's hospital bills for leukaemia deplete their resources and they lose face with the Sudanese community when the brother, Omar who had already developed a drug habit in Khartoum, is arrested and imprisoned for stabbing a police officer in a drug raid. Najwa is generally conformist, compliant, and unambitious, expecting life to take the natural course for someone of her standing – marriage to someone approved by her parents, followed by raising children. Untrained for any profession, her steady slide begins, seeing her finally working as a maid in order to survive.

Najwa is a habitual outsider to her own life. As a young person, she is distanced from herself and envies the full existential immersion that she observes in unsophisticated fellow college students and the poor servants who work for the family. The people whom she watches and secretly envies, seem to have a contentment and sense of fellow-feeling, through a collective performance of the daily Islamic rituals and other religious obligations, absent among her well-to-do, cosmopolitan set. She observes the same sense of completeness and fulfilment among the multinational group of women whom she meets at the Regent's Park mosque in London. Her desire for spiritual self-realisation leads her to the full practice of Islam. She also begins to wear the hijab. It is Najwa's inspired belief in Islam that causes her attraction to Tamer, the young



brother of PhD student, Lamya, in whose apartment she comes to work as a maid, and as a nanny to Lamya's toddler, Mai.<sup>14</sup>

Most studies of romance fiction present a “morphology” of the essential structures or features of the romance plot. Generally, these are versions of the same thing. For the purposes of this essay, the eight essential plot elements identified by Pamela Regis, a major scholar of the romance novel, will be used as a point of departure for the analysis of the romance plot. For Regis, the romance novel is a liberating female script.<sup>15</sup> Regis stresses, in addition, that the plot elements are not sequential and may occur in various orders in specific narratives.

Eight narrative events take a heroine in a romance novel from encumbered to free. In one or more scenes, romance novels always depict the following: the initial state of society in which heroine and hero must court, the meeting between heroine and hero, the barrier to the union of heroine and hero, the attraction between the heroine and hero, the declaration of love between heroine and hero, the point of ritual death, the recognition by heroine and hero of the means to overcome the barrier, and the betrothal. These elements are essential. In addition, the romance novel may include scenes depicting a scapegoat exiled, [and] bad characters converted to goodness.<sup>16</sup>

Although Regis does not elaborate on it, the “scapegoat” often may take the form of an anti-hero or secondary hero against whom the hero's virtues may be compared, even where the hero has “rough edges” which are smoothed through interaction with the heroine as the narrative progresses. The relationship between Najwa and Tamer contains all of these elements, but because *Minaret* is a “story about love” rather than a “love story,” it does not end with the union of the heroine and hero.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Lamya and her philandering husband, Hisham, are estranged in a distant relationship which sees Lamya studying on her own in London.

<sup>15</sup> This may be contrasted with the view going back to Simone de Beauvoir of romantic love as patriarchally oppressive.

<sup>16</sup> Pamela Regis, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003) 30.

<sup>17</sup> The Nigerian Hausa Anglophone writer, Abubakar A. Ibrahim, makes the distinction between the “love story” and the “story about love” in discussing his novel *Season of Crimson Blossoms*. See Abubakar A. Ibrahim, *Africa in Words*, 2015 Africa Writes #P&P – Q&A with author and Africa Writes guest Abubakar Adam Ibrahim, *Africa in Words*, 2020, <https://africainwords.com/2020/07/04/2015-africa-writes-pp-qa-with->

Neither does it end tragically with the death or metaphorical destruction of the heroine and hero. Instead, the ending, where the obstruction presented by the mother seems insurmountable, is a complex dialectic of desires both fulfilled and unfulfilled for the heroine and hero, but where, relatively speaking, the heroine emerges worse off.

Referring to Regis's plot elements, Aboulela defines the London society in which Najwa, the heroine, and Tamer, the hero, find themselves as a society which is unwelcoming to immigrants, especially post-9/11, hostile to *Muslim* immigrants. Able to compare life before donning the hijab, to life after adopting the hijab, Najwa is keenly aware of the differences in the way she is perceived. Before wearing the hijab, when she passes a group of builders on scaffolding, she luxuriates in their wolf-whistles and admiration of her sexiness – like Diana Ross, she suggests about her hair and her style.<sup>18</sup> By contrast, when she wears the hijab, the streets of London become threatening to her. Using public transport, she tries to catch buses with conductors on them so that she feels safer. On one occasion, three young thugs are abusive, shouting, “You Muslim scum,” dousing her with their soft drink.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the Islamic sartorial modesty, which is part of Najwa's conscious self-actualisation, is viewed in Islamophobic Britain as a marker of Islam as a threat.

Najwa's first person narrative also makes her readers aware of how the presence of the hero is interpreted by the host population. Because of the awkwardness of their relationship, Najwa and Tamer never go out alone together. Instead, Tamer joins Najwa when she takes Mai out for walks. They feel most comfortable in parks with other immigrant nannies and children, since there, Tamer is not viewed with suspicion. Outside of the safe zone of the parks, Najwa senses “the slight unease he inspires in the people around [them...She] turn[s] and look[s] at him through their eyes. [He is t]all, young, Arab-looking, dark eyes and the beard, just like a terrorist.”<sup>20</sup> The society in which the couple finds themselves is therefore one in which they are marginalised, in which they are viewed as a threat, and which is threatening to them. Their relationship, unlike the cross-cultural relationship and marriage of Sammar and Rae in *The*

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author-and-africa-writes-guest-abubakar-adam-ibrahim/. Also see Abubakar A. Ibrahim, *Season of Crimson Blossoms* (Abuja: Cassava Republic Press, 2017).

<sup>18</sup> Aboulela, *Minaret*, 130-1.

<sup>19</sup> Aboulela, *Minaret*, 80-1.

<sup>20</sup> Aboulela, *Minaret*, 100.

*Translator*, is not a relationship which would redress the perception of their community in the eyes of the host society, even if their union were to be achieved.

The first meeting of the romance hero and heroine, which represents another one of Regis' plot elements, introduces the reader to the essence of their personalities, the spark of their attraction, and the central tension which will develop in the course of their relationship. *Minaret* begins with a prelude, started with the *Bismillah*,<sup>21</sup> the invocation which prefaces all significant actions of Muslims. The prelude foreshadows the obstruction to their relationship even before it presents the first encounter of the heroine and hero. It begins with autumn in London. The heroine is about to meet her new employer at the employer's apartment for the first time. Najwa orients herself against the minaret of the Regent's Park mosque as she walks to the apartment block and meditates on the experience of the seasons of the year in London: "London is at its most beautiful in autumn. In summer it is seedy and swollen, in winter it is overwhelmed by Christmas lights and in spring, the season of birth, there is always disappointment. Now it is at its best, now it is poised like a mature woman whose beauty is no longer fresh but still surprisingly potent."<sup>22</sup>

In this opening sequence, Najwa projects her effaced appreciation of her own physical attractions onto the city of London. At the heart of the sense of herself is the fact that she is still desirable, despite her age. Although we are never told exactly how old she is, she does observe when she first meets Tamer's mother, Doctora Zeinab, that she "could not be more than ten years older than Najwa."<sup>23</sup> In other words, Najwa is old enough to be the nineteen-year-old Tamer's mother. Because she is old enough to be his mother, Tamer's own mother refuses to accept the relationship, representing the obstacle which leads to the end of the relationship and the complex ending of the novel.

Although there are no strong textual allusions to the Qur'anic story of Yusuf and Zulaikha, which also occurs with variations in the Judeo-Christian tradition, there are many similarities with *Minaret*. Najwa, like

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<sup>21</sup> *Bism Allahi, Ar-rahman, Ar-raheem (In the name of Allah, the beneficent, the merciful)* (Aboulela, *Minaret*, 1).

<sup>22</sup> Aboulela, *Minaret*, 1.

<sup>23</sup> Aboulela, *Minaret*, 71.

Zulaikha, is the older desiring woman attracted to a young, virtuous innocent. She is the partner in the relationship who is shown sometimes to use her greater life and sexual experience playfully to manipulate and tease Tamer. Even though there is another equally significant difference between them, namely, that they do not enjoy an equal social standing, since Najwa is a maid, the crucial difference in the context of this romance is age.

The foreshadowing of obstruction prefaces the meeting of the heroine and hero. Najwa and Tamer meet when Najwa is fumbling with the elevator buttons, trying to go up to Lamyā's apartment for the first time. She is instantly attracted to Tamer's eyes, the proverbial pathway to the soul, which are "liquid brown," shining not with "intelligence" like the eyes of Anwar, her previous lover, but with "intuition." The moment is charged with an erotico-spiritual intensity which has Najwa musing: "I have heard the saying that you can smell Paradise on the young." And when Tamer walks out of the building, this momentary time-out-of-time reverts to the mundane – "everything goes back to normal again."<sup>24</sup> The first meeting thus starkly contrasts the difference in age between the heroine and hero. Najwa is old enough to be Tamer's mother and, as will be suggested when the plot element of the barrier is discussed, makes her sensitive to Doctora Zeinab's claims as the biological mother.

Regarding the plot element of the attraction, Regis outlines that this is a "scene, or series of scenes scattered throughout the novel [which] establishes for the reader the reason that this couple must marry. [The attraction, furthermore,] keeps the heroine and hero involved long enough to surmount the barrier."<sup>25</sup> Because *Minaret* is a story about love rather than a love story, the barrier in this narrative is never overcome, and the couple's wishes are never fulfilled – desire is not transformed into pleasure. Ironically, it is precisely spirituality and the belief in an Islamic ethic which constitute the attraction of the couple. However, the Islamic ethic which also privileges the mother, ironically constitutes the dissenting mother as obstruction to the romance. The prior claims of the mother in Islam override the claims of the lover.

For Najwa, Tamer embodies a connection with the Divine that she has never experienced with anyone else. While the rest of his family is Mus-

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<sup>24</sup> Aboulela, *Minaret*, 3.

<sup>25</sup> Regis, *A Natural History*, 33.

lim by culture and association, Tamer's values and commitments are such that he, through Islam, strives for the perfect balance of self and society, peace and justice, reading widely to deepen his knowledge of Islam. In its presentation of Tamer, the novel makes it clear that he has no interest in Islam used as a political ideology against perceived enemies. Tamer's Islam is a personal quest for self-realisation through religion. Unlike his mother and sister, Tamer follows the Islamic dietary code. Drinking and drugging are not part of his youth culture, and he is found in the mosque rather than in the club. There is an implied comparison between Tamer and Omar, Najwa's twin, which allows Tamer's virtues to be set in relief. Najwa's and Tamer's common self-actualisation-objective is their actualisation through God and a community of faith, whose earthly, practical embodiment is represented by the Hajj. Najwa states: "More than anything else...I would like to go on Hajj. If my Hajj is accepted, I will come back without any sins and start my life again, fresh."<sup>26</sup> Tamer responds as a child who does not carry the burden of sin as Najwa does: "I want to ride a camel from Medina to Mecca like the Prophet, peace be upon him, did."<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps the passage in the novel which most suggestively captures the attraction of Najwa and Tamer is one from early on in their relationship, before their feelings become apparent to each other: "Sometimes we meet on the landing, our reflections in the mirror making it seem as if there are four of us. The mirror in the landing is compassionate: it makes me look young, makes me look better than I feel though I always feel uplifted when I see him. It is natural; a beautiful, devout youth with striking eyes."<sup>28</sup>

The narrative strategically makes use of a secondary hero or anti-hero in order to clarify the spiritual connection of Najwa with Tamer, which in the final analysis, motivates her negotiation of the obstruction represented by the mother. There is a mutual attraction between Najwa and Anwar which goes back to their days at college in Khartoum. Anwar, an active member of the political left, is involved in the attempts to overthrow the corrupt Sudanese dictatorship, a regime in which Najwa's father is a minister. Anwar's is a conflicted physical attraction to Najwa since he despises what her wealthy, aristocratic family represents. He also thinks

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<sup>26</sup> Aboulela, *Minaret*, 209.

<sup>27</sup> Aboulela, *Minaret*, 209.

<sup>28</sup> Aboulela, *Minaret*, 100.

that religion is the retrogressive sop of backward people, which would forever mire the country in problems.

After the left seizes power and Najwa's father is executed, Anwar makes no effort to enquire after Najwa who is in exile in London. He does make contact with her, however, when he also is exiled in London in 1989, after the government with which Anwar had found favour, is overthrown in a military coup. In London, Anwar is an asylum seeker, living in impoverished insecurity, hoping for a job as a newspaper reporter. He draws Najwa into his circle since he needs someone to help him translate his articles into idiomatic English, hypocritically taking advantage of the benefits of Najwa's private-school education, which he had always condemned. He also does not hesitate to accept Najwa's gifts of clothes and money to pay for his PhD. Anwar is unpredictable, vacillating between declarations of love and sneering abuse. He seduces Najwa at the same time, as he quietly maintains ties with a cousin whom his family has arranged for him to marry. Najwa links her physical relationship with Anwar to her final "coming down in the world," in the same way that drugs and imprisonment were her brother's coming down.<sup>29</sup> The contrast in the primary and secondary romantic relationships is stark. Anwar's commitment to the "religion" of Marxism does not prevent him from using Najwa, while Tamer's commitment to Islam places her out of exploitative bounds.

Regis describes the declaration as the "scene or scenes in which the hero declares his love for the heroine and the heroine her love for the hero."<sup>30</sup> In *Minaret*, the declaration is not so much a declaration of love, but instead a declaration that the suppressed attraction of the heroine and hero cannot continue without their religious integrity being retained. When they are seen together by Najwa's friend, Shahinaz, Tamer says to Najwa that "[i]t's not very Islamic for a man and woman to be friends...I heard a sheikh once say that it's like putting gunpowder and fire next to each other. [He then] blurts out, 'we should get married.'"<sup>31</sup> Najwa makes light of the situation, but it is apparent that their relationship is headed for a make-or-break climax. This climax takes the form of the point of ritual death, which "marks the moment in the narrative when the union between heroine and hero, the hoped-for resolution,

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<sup>29</sup> Aboulela, *Minaret*, 100.

<sup>30</sup> Regis, *A Natural History*, 34.

<sup>31</sup> Aboulela, *Minaret*, 211.

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seems absolutely impossible, when it seems that the barrier will remain more substantial than ever.”<sup>32</sup>

In *Minaret*, the barrier represented by the dissenting mother, the point of ritual death, is not brought down by the element of recognition – “new information” that will allow the barrier to be “overcome.”<sup>33</sup> The moment of ritual death is thus “translated” into the social death of the heroine which sees her psychically trapped and consumed by guilt. *Minaret* thus underscores the significance of the obstacle, which is the crux of the romance narrative.

## The Dissenting Mother as Obstruction in Islamic Romance

In Islamic romance, God is the ultimate factor in intimate relationships, becoming an obstacle where, in one way or another, the couple’s desires do not conform with the Divine code. Divinities play a role in other religious traditions too, including African animisms, where gods and ancestors are significant actors in the personal lives of subjects. In the nascent scholarship of Islamic romance, Abdullah-Poulos’ study of African-American romance fiction is illuminating. She proposes what she terms the “Stable Muslim Love Triangle” as the foundation of Muslim romance. This includes the heroine and hero, but also “the deity, Allah, at the apex as *mediator of desire*, driving the viability of love in plots.”<sup>34</sup> Abdullah-Poulos contrasts African-American Muslim romance with Christian romance. Studies of Christian romance position God as “a victorious competitor – either through pain/death or enlightenment – for love between human subjects. By contrast, in African-American romances, “the immediate superior status of the deity in the love triangle [is realised with one] or both human subjects pursu[ing] His affection and approval to the point of deferring to His protocols when determining the suitability of the object of desire.”<sup>35</sup>

*Minaret* suggests further that in Muslim romance narratives, the figure of the mother may be more significant than it is in other cultural and religious traditions, precisely because of the status uniquely accorded the mother in Islam. Adapting Abdullah-Poulos’ concept of the love triangle

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<sup>32</sup> Regis, *A Natural History*, 35.

<sup>33</sup> Regis, *A Natural History*, 36.

<sup>34</sup> Abdullah-Poulos, “The Stable Muslim Love Triangle,” 1 (original emphasis).

<sup>35</sup> Abdullah-Poulos, “The Stable Muslim Love Triangle,” 8.

with God at the apex, Muslim romances may more broadly be found to incorporate the mother at an apex below the ultimate apex in God – a status endorsed and guaranteed by God. Ghadir Zannoun alerts us to Aboulela's focus on the mother in the first novel, *The Translator*. Prior to her relationship with Rae, the heroine, Sammar had been married to her cousin, as traditionally is common in Arab and other Muslim cultures. Zannoun brings into relief Sammar's affection for her aunt Mahasen, her husband Tareg's mother, which supersedes Sammar's feelings for her husband himself – "I love your mother more than you" – she says playfully, it would appear, to Tareg, but her words carry a deeper meaning.<sup>36</sup> The figure of the mother is explored with more complexity in Aboulela's next novel, *Minaret*, the novel considered in this essay.

One needs to bear in mind the status of the mother in Islam, which underpins the ethos of *Minaret*. Although Islam encourages respect for both mother and father, a special relationship of love and duty is forged with the mother. Both the Qur'an and the hadith, or narrations of the Prophet (*pbuh*), enjoin gratitude to one's parents, but single out the relationship with the mother as unique. The hadith which suggests that paradise lies at the feet of the mother is very well known. Perhaps less well known is the occasion where the Prophet is asked about the order in which one owes love and respect: The Prophet replied three times that love and respect are owed to the mother, and only the fourth time does he mention the father. This clearly is the ethical framework within which *Minaret* operates, even though in practice, many Islamic cultures may disregard the status and privilege owed to the woman as mother.

When Tamer complains to Najwa about being forced to study Business rather than Islamic History, Najwa appeases him by suggesting that she is sure "Allah will reward [him] for trying to please [his] parents."<sup>37</sup> Apart from a brief reference to Najwa's father in the novel, it is mothers who emerge as fully rounded characters, whose unique bond with children is emphasised, as is the child's desire and duty to please the mother. Both Najwa's and Omar's relationship with their mother, both in Khartoum and in London is mapped in detail, as is Tamer's relationship with his mother, Doctora Zeinab. Significant attention is also given to Najwa's friend, Shahinaz. Through the physicality and daily demands of Shahinaz's

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<sup>36</sup> *The Translator* 10, quoted in Ghadir K. Zannoun, "Home as Love: Transcending Positionality in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*," *Humanities* 8, no.72 (2019), 7.

<sup>37</sup> Aboulela, *Minaret*, 101.

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mothering of her baby boy, the magnitude of the demands of motherhood are highlighted. The relationship of romantic love between Najwa and Tamer is therefore set against a wide matrix of examples of maternal love, modulating erotic attachments.

Love for the mother also creates fear of the curse of the mother, and in Islam, as in African traditional and other religions, the curse is as real as the threat of physical violence or aggression. As a teenager in Khartoum, Najwa's mother warns her against the relationship with Anwar, heedful of the Islamic concept of *kafā'ah* which encourages a rough equivalence of the couple in marriage. In London, Najwa interprets the sordidness of her affair with Anwar as admonishment for not heeding her mother's advice.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Najwa sees her brother, Omar as almost beyond redemption for his abuse of their mother in his drug-crazed condition, resulting in her cursing him never to be successful, never to be happy.

Najwa says to her brother in prison: "You are here because you broke Mama's heart. A son shouldn't hurt his mother. She cursed you with bad luck and Allah listens to a mother's prayer."<sup>39</sup> Najwa's actions at the end of the novel are motivated by her "motherly" apprehension that Tamer will be cursed by his mother's disappointment at marrying her. Najwa's "mothering" of Tamer is evident throughout the text. Like a mother, Najwa also fantasises about young women who may make more suitable wives for Tamer than herself. Thus, it is both as mother and lover that Najwa feels Doctora Zeinab's anguish, which also motivates her fear for the consequences of Tamer's disobeying his mother. Even though Najwa thinks Doctora Zeinab has a "practical" rather than "metaphysical" goodness that closes her to Tamer's spirituality, she nonetheless fears the maternal curse: "He is better than her and she will not acknowledge it. I see this clearly now. She is an obstacle to his spiritual growth or, more precisely, her disapproval is. She is a test for him and he will have to pass. I will not let him fail. I will not let her curse him, not like my mother cursed Omar."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Doctora Zeinab implicitly applies the same principle of *kafā'ah* to Najwa's possible marriage to her son, in terms of which the marriage may be strained because of the age difference and the unlikelihood that they might have children. Tamer highlights that the Prophet's first wife was fifteen years his senior, but in the novelistic relationship, as more generally in Islamic communities this dimension of the prophetic life does not encourage marriage to a more mature wife.

<sup>39</sup> Aboulela, *Minaret*, 196.

<sup>40</sup> Aboulela, *Minaret*, 264.

Thus, even though Najwa smells paradise on Tamer, a paradise in which she could share, she gives him up. As she allows Tamer to find heaven at the feet of his mother, she lays her heart at the mother's feet.

These complex ethical negotiations involving the mother, are replicated on a material plane by considerations of money that again bring Najwa spiritually down at the end of the narrative. The discovery of the love affair results in Najwa losing her job, and Tamer moving out of the apartment to squat in the mosque. A series of strategic meetings take place between the lover-mother Najwa, and Tamer, and also between Najwa and Tamer's mother, Doctora Zeinab. At the heart of these meetings and negotiations is Tamer's wellbeing. Doctora Zeinab is desperate to remove Najwa as a potential emotional timebomb in her son's life. She comes to Najwa's apartment to pay her the month's salary that Lamya omitted to give her, following Lamya's horror when she discovers their relationship. Doctora Zeinab also gives her a large sum of money as "compensation" for the humiliating way in which she was treated by Lamya.

Najwa accepts what could be seen as a bribe in exchange for a pledge to withdraw from Tamer's life. It strikes Najwa, when she is depositing the cheque, that the "bribe" is for exactly the same amount she had loaned Anwar to pay for his PhD. He never pays her back. She understands her loss to be the penalty which she had to pay to extricate herself from the sleaziness of that relationship. She consoles herself that in being given the money by Tamer's mother, she is now being paid back. The spiritual upliftment that the reader witnesses in Najwa throughout the novel, is lowered by the overt grubbiness of money at the end. It also strikes the reader that Najwa has allowed herself to be paid twice for her last month of work. At one of their final meetings, Najwa reminds Tamer that she has not been paid. Perhaps she does this to belittle herself so that it is not hard for Tamer to leave her. Tamer pays her from the pocket money he gets from his mother. However, the novel opens Najwa's motivations to scrutiny since she does not return the money when Doctora Zeinab pays her the wages for a second time. In other words, Najwa knowingly "double-dips," dropping her standing in the ethical and spiritual scales.

The closure is even more ambiguous and open-ended, since Najwa decides to use the "bribe" money to go for her Hajj, clutching desperately at a last emotional and spiritual upliftment. As in other Aboulela novels,

where dream sequences convey the deepest meanings of the narrative, *Minaret* ends with Najwa's feverish dream. She dreams that her friend, Shahinaz comes to her, saying, "You took the money, so it can't have been love."<sup>41</sup> The dream then projects back in time to when Najwa was a child in her parents' home, but the home now is a prison with "the ceiling...caved in, the floor...guttled and the crumbling walls...smeared with guilt."<sup>42</sup> Najwa therefore finds herself caught in the same emotional and spiritual constraint as at the start of the novel: "I've come down in the world. I've slid to a place where the ceiling is low and where there isn't much room to move."<sup>43</sup>

## Conclusion

We need to return to the concept of the obstruction which gives the romance its narrative drive: So significant is the obstruction, that its removal signals the end of the love story. Pamela Regis' morphology of the romance plot defines the obstacle or barrier as the "reasons that this heroine and hero cannot marry. [She also adds that] the romance novel's conflict often consists entirely of this barrier between the heroine and hero."<sup>44</sup> In *Minaret*, the barrier presented by the dissenting mother cannot be removed, and the complexity of the ending is overdetermined by the lover who is also a social "mother." This lover-mother, furthermore, is cognisant of the unique status of the mother in Islam.

Usually in a romance novel, when the obstruction is removed, the lovers are able to achieve union. This constitutes the happy ending. The tragic ending in death is the ultimate obstruction which, paradoxically, also allows the supreme joining, namely, the metaphysical union. The ending of *Minaret* is unhappy but not tragic, since the lovers are forever parted, without the consolation of the paradoxical union in death. The parting, furthermore, is unequal. The narrative suggests that the youthful Tamer will bounce back quite easily. The closure of *Minaret* could have brought it closer to a happy ending by giving Najwa the self-gratification of being able to take the moral high road. She could have separated from Tamer, in this way protecting his faith and spirituality, embodied here in the necessity of the approval of the mother. However, for the ending to be happier, Najwa also needed to turn down the "bribe," which she uses to

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<sup>41</sup> Aboulela, *Minaret*, 275.

<sup>42</sup> Aboulela, *Minaret*, 276.

<sup>43</sup> Aboulela, *Minaret*, 1.

<sup>44</sup> Regis, *A Natural History*, 32.

finance her Hajj. *Minaret* thus significantly opens up the end of the romance to ambiguity and uncertainty since, not only are the lovers parted, but Najwa's spiritual upliftment, visible throughout the narrative, is suddenly and unexpectedly collapsed through the inexplicable seediness of her final actions, which her Hajj may, or may not, redeem. Crucial to the complexity of this ending is the figure of the mother, whose significance in Muslim romance, Aboulela very powerfully underscores.

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