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# Piety as Ethical Self-Formation: Rethinking Agency in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*

Monir A. Choudhury*
Department of English Language and Literature, College of Arts and Letters, University of Bisha, Bisha, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

***Abstract*—Contemporary arguments in feminist literary criticism have increasingly challenged the belief that agency must be expressed in terms of resistance, emancipation, or secular autonomy. In this respect, the novel *Minaret* by Leila Aboulela proposes a powerful reworking of Muslim female subjectivity based on the practise of religion as a discipline. This article examines the novel in terms of piety as ethical self-formation and argues that it redefines agency in ways that challenge secular, liberal conceptions of self-sovereignty. The paper uses a theory-based close reading to examine Najwa's transformation through prayer, veiling, silence, and submission as the development of cultivated capacity as described by Saba Mahmood. These embodied practices are not merely symbolic identifiers; they are means of moral self-cultivation. Situated within the context of post-secular feminist debates and diasporic literary studies, the article shows that Najwa's submission is not oppression but a deliberate alignment, thus breaking down the binary of oppression and emancipation. This paper broadens the conceptual range of feminist literary criticism and positions piety as a multifaceted form of agency in the works of contemporary Muslim women by foregrounding habituation, embodiment, and moral intentionality.**

***Index Terms*—post-secular feminism, diaspora, Leila Aboulela, *Minaret*, religious subjectivity**

## I. Introduction

*Minaret* (2005) by Leila Aboulela is uniquely positioned among Anglophone Muslim women's fiction as a diasporic novel focused not on religious liberation but on a return to religion (Ben Amara, 2022). The book follows the spiritual transformation of Najwa, a Sudanese woman who relocates between elite secular privilege in Khartoum and migrant precarity in London and between cultural Islam and lived religious devotion. However, critical treatments of Najwa have tended to explore her religiosity through secular, liberal paradigms in which agency is synonymous with resistance, autonomy, or the ability to escape tradition (Awajan & Al-Shetawi, 2021).

Dominant feminist interpretations of the writing of Muslim women have traditionally prioritised structures of voice, visibility, and defiance, framing religious commitment as an act of oppression or a tactical act of resistance (Alimahomed-Wilson, 2020; Satiti, 2021). Even when it has been sympathetic to the faith of Muslim women, scholarship has tended to measure agency against liberal autonomy, implicitly moralising self-determination as independent of religious norms (Saleem & Zaidi, 2022; Silva, 2022).

Recent post-secular feminist literature has called into question this paradigm's belief that emancipation should be secular (Grenz, 2023; Sahar, 2025). Based on Saba Mahmood's theory of piety as ethical self-formation, these studies have proposed that agency cannot be reduced to acts of resistance but must be comprehended as an ability that is developed in the process of discipline, habituation, and moral intentionality (Longman, 2021; Tareen, 2023).

Although Mahmood's framework has become increasingly prominent in anthropological and religious studies, it has rarely been applied to Anglophone Muslim women's fiction (Ali, 2024; Alrashidy, 2023). Critical studies of *Minaret* have frequently focused on themes such as identity formation, spatial negotiation, and postcolonial belonging (Amara, 2024; Assa, 2024) or have viewed Najwa's spiritual turn as a psychological consolation or an ideological retreat. Although the idea of Islam as empowering has been explored in the novel (Awajan & Al-Shetawi, 2021), the rhetoric has often been confined to emancipatory paradigms and has neglected to investigate piety as a form of ethical work. With scholarship on post-secular feminism growing (Grenz, 2023; Iqbal, 2025), a persistent gap in literary studies is the under-theorisation of religious practice as disciplined self-formation in diasporic fiction.

The present article fills this gap by posing the following questions:

- How is *Minaret* an expression of piety as ethical agency?
- How does Najwa's religiosity confound secular, liberal conceptions of autonomy and freedom?

Instead of understanding Najwa's veiling, prayers, and moral restraint as expressions of submission or opposition, the paper offers a reading in which these actions are means of forming an ethical subject. In *Minaret*, piety is framed not as a stable identity or a form of ideological adherence but as a process by which the self is habituated or self-disciplined through repetition, discipline, and deliberate aiming.

* Corresponding Author. Email: monirchy@ub.edu.sa

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Placing *Minaret* in the context of post-secular feminist literary criticism, this article presents a thesis that Najwa's transformation illustrates an alternative ethical paradigm in diaspora fiction, one that does not assimilate feministic individuals into liberal individualism or caricatured patriarchy. Thus, it promotes the literary use of Mahmood's reconceptualisation of agency and enlarges the conceptual lexicon that allows the subjectivity of Muslim women to be perceived in modern Anglophone literature.

## II. Literature Review

### *A. Secular, Liberal, Feminist Readings of Muslim Women*

Secular, liberal assumptions of agency, autonomy, and emancipation have often influenced feminist work on Muslim women writers. In this paradigm, agency is generally conceptualised as opposition to the control of patriarchy, public visibility, or escape from religious confinement (Saleem & Zaidi, 2022; Silva, 2022).

Silva (2022) showed that despite claims of corrective postcolonial feminist scholarship, studies have remained structured by the same teleologies of secular progress, albeit in a much more subtle way, where emancipation from religion is the standard course of empowerment. In a comparable context, Saleem and Zaidi (2022) demonstrated that accounts of Muslim women's experiences have often been evaluated according to neoliberal values of self-realisation and social assertiveness, thereby excluding forms of agency grounded in religious belief.

Recent post-secular feminist scholarship has challenged this interpretive hegemony (Ali, 2024; Chanda, 2024). Grenz (2023) argued in favour of a methodological double critique which questions patriarchal religious order and secular notions that make faith-based subjectivity incomprehensible. Based on Mahmood and Butler, Sahar (2025) criticised the Enlightenment idea of autonomy as sovereign detachment, arguing that, in its place, ethical subjectivity can be constituted in terms of attachment, obligation, and discipline.

In this extended argument, Mahmood's reconceptualisation of agency as cultivated capacity, rather than oppositional resistance, is central. The fact that the conception of piety as ethical self-formation remains significant today, as reflected in recent engagements with Mahmood's work (Eldridge, 2025; Iqbal, 2025), confirms the ongoing importance of this idea and situates Mahmood's theory within current debates on post-secularism, embodiment, and critique. Nonetheless, these notions have not always been incorporated in literary studies offering close readings of fiction written by Muslim women.

### *B. Critical Reception of Minaret*

In recent years, critical scholarship on *Minaret* has expanded, with a particular focus on the topics of diaspora, identity negotiation, and Islamic belonging. Spatial politics (Amara, 2024), displaced belonging (Assa, 2024), the formation of a hybrid identity (Almir Mer, 2024; Rouabhia Salma, 2020), and Islam as a moral counter to Western materialism have also been studied in relation to this novel (Talafha et al., 2022). Najwa's experiences have been critically analysed to demonstrate her liminal life in London and how faith works as a stabilising force. Aboulela frequently depicts her characters' focus on self-definition and self-emancipation. These readings provide valuable insights into Najwa's journey from elite secularism in Sudan to migrant precarity in London.

Other critics have described Najwa's religiosity as empowerment in the context of diaspora. Awajan and Al-Shetawi (2021) understood Islam as providing moral clarity and existential grounding in *Minaret*, whereas Salah (2023) interpreted the novel as providing ethical counsel to Arab women navigating Western environments. Majid (2025) redefined the concept of freedom in relational terms, implying that the relation to God redefines the meaning of autonomy. These readings have gone beyond reductive victim discourses and have acknowledged the spiritual conversion narrative in the novel.

However, it has been a consistent trend for scholars to consider either a return to faith as a healing response to trauma or redemption after a fall within society as a social condition. Even in positive terms, religiosity has been referred to as a process of psychological healing or even cultural authenticity as opposed to well-disciplined ethical work. Themes of identity recovery, belonging, and empowerment have often taken precedence over sustained attention to embodied practices, prayer, veiling, modest comportment, and silence, which influence Najwa's subjectivity throughout her life (Bendjemil, 2024; Rodrigues, 2022).

Furthermore, even though a number of scholars have referred to notions of agency or empowerment, few of them have provided an extended theoretical consideration of Mahmood's model of ethical self-formation applied to literary analysis.

### *C. Gaps in Existing Scholarship*

This review establishes three major gaps in the literature. First, there is a lack of sustained engagement with piety as ethical formation in literary studies of Muslim women's fiction. Although anthropological and religious studies have examined embodied piety movements extensively (Kolakkadan, 2024; Osella & Soares, 2020), literary criticism has prioritised symbolic representation or sociopolitical context over ethical habituation.

Second, secular, liberal models of agency have continually influenced the formation of interpretative patterns, even implicitly. The continued use of emancipatory narratives has excluded other ideas of freedom based on discipline, submission, and moral intentionality (Grenz, 2023; Sahar, 2025). Consequently, religious practices have either been

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absorbed in empowerment discourses or have been on the defensive against allegations of oppression.

Third, despite gaining momentum, post-secular debates in the humanities have yet to be assimilated into close literary analysis. The Mahmood-inspired ethical turn has not been fully harnessed to rethink diasporic Muslim women's fiction beyond identity politics or the trauma paradigm.

This paper fills these gaps by providing a theory-based close reading of *Minaret* that is based directly on Mahmood's definition of piety as ethical self-formation. Instead of evaluating Najwa's religiosity against liberal standards of independence, it explores the roles of prayer, veiling, silence, and submission as disciplines in which agency is developed. In doing so, the study contributes to post-secular feminist literary criticism and repositions Muslim women's fiction beyond the dichotomy of oppression and resistance.

## III. Theoretical Framework: Piety as Ethical Self-Formation

### *A. Rethinking Agency Beyond Liberal Autonomy*

This paper adopts Mahmood's reconceptualisation of agency as its primary analytical framework. In *Politics of Piety*, Mahmood critiqued the presumption prevalent in liberal feminist thought that agency must take the form of resistance to norms or liberation from structures of authority. She proposed an alternative understanding of agency, arguing that agency should not be understood solely in terms of subversion. Rather, agency can be reflected in the capacity to inhabit and cultivate norms through disciplined practice. Based on ethnographic research on women in the Egyptian mosque movement, Mahmood illustrated that the participants viewed their religious commitments not as passive compliance but as an active ethical struggle. They sought to shape their desires, wills, and dispositions through repeated practices such as prayer, modest comportment, and moral vigilance. From this perspective, agency is not a manifestation of an already autonomous self but an event whereby the latter is established. Ethical subjectivity is achieved through habituation, practice, and deliberate discipline. Instead of assuming that freedom involves an absence of tradition, Mahmood proposed that being bound to religious norms can form the basis through which specific forms of agency are realised.

In line with this view, Sahar (2025) differentiated between secular autonomy and what she referred to as consolidated subjectivity, where freedom is expressed not in terms of detachment but in terms of alignment. Eldridge (2025) explained that Mahmood's intervention is methodological; it involves suspending normative judgements to investigate the formation of subjects in religious traditions. Iqbal (2025) emphasised the persistent relevance of Mahmood's model in modern discussions of post-secular feminism and ethical life.

### *B. Ethical Habituation and Embodied Practice*

Mahmood's account of agency is closely linked to an understanding of ethics as formation; ethical dispositions are not seen as inherited but as constructed through recurring bodily and temporal practices. Drawing on the Foucauldian concept of subjectivation, Mahmood considered religious practices as self-disciplined practices through which individuals shape their behaviour and align their desires with particular virtues. Such practices are important because they are used repeatedly. Through repetition, actions become habitual, and through discipline, new intentions are formed.

This focus on embodiment is supported by recent scholarship on lived Islam. Kolakkadan (2024) showed how the issue of piety in young Muslim women is worked out in terms of corporeal behaviour and reflexive involvement in religious discourse. Osella and Soares (2020) warned against thinking of ethical self-cultivation as ideological rigidity and instead highlighted its dynamic and continuous nature. Agency in such systems is progressive, processual, and usually internalised.

In the literary field, Chaoui (2023) demonstrated how veiling in modern fiction can be perceived as an active moral act rather than as a form of subjugation. El Shakry (2024) categorised sensuous piety as a form of ethical cognition that destabilises the practices of secular readings. These interventions highlighted the fact that religious practice should be seen as formative but not expressive.

This conceptualisation of piety as habituated practice displaces the interpretive focus from dramatic rebellion to a long-term process of discipline. It prefigures time and repetition rather than disruption and spectacle.

### *C. Conceptual Orientation of This Study*

When applying Mahmood's framework to *Minaret*, this article views religious practices as formative practices rather than as symbolic identifiers or ideological expressions. The aim is not to evaluate the normative desirability of Najwa's actions or to assimilate her religiosity into liberal codes of empowerment. Instead, the analysis explores the roles of prayer, veiling, silence, and submission as methods of developing an ethical subject. Retaining Mahmood's framework as the primary theoretical lens ensures conceptual consistency. The central analytical task is to map the mechanisms of ethical becoming as they are articulated within the narrative. This paper places *Minaret* in the context of a wider re-evaluation of agency in contemporary Muslim women's writing through foregrounding habituation, embodiment, and moral intentionality.

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## IV. Methodology

This study employs a theory-informed close reading as its primary methodological framework. Rather than treating *Minaret* as a form of sociological data about Muslim women's lives, it approaches the novel as a literary text whose narrative structure, characterisation, temporality, and descriptive detail encode processes of ethical formation. In this respect, close reading entails sustained attention to narrative voice, focalisation, embodied description, and patterns of repetition. Since Mahmood's framework conceptualises agency as a practice formed through discipline and habituation, the analysis prioritises recurring religious practices, such as prayer, veiling, Qur'anic recitation, silence, and moral restraint, over scenes of dramatic transformation. The ethical change in *Minaret* is a process that develops over time; hence, the approach to the novel conforms to the temporal logic of the novel itself, attending to subtle changes in Najwa's inner life and behaviour.

Studies of lived Islam have demonstrated that ethical subject formation is achieved through repetitive bodily and temporal disciplines (Kolakkadan, 2024; Osella & Soares, 2020). In literary criticism, this focus on embodiment makes it possible to read Muslim women's fiction in a way that foregrounds habituated practice rather than oppositional gestures (Chaoui, 2023). Based on these insights, this paper interprets religious acts not as fixed symbols but as narrative practices through which subjectivity is restructured.

Mahmood's conceptualisation of agency as a cultivated capacity provides the interpretive framework through which textual moments are analysed. This application is literary rather than anthropological. The analysis does not aim to generalise the experiences of Muslim women or evaluate theological correctness. Instead, it explores how *Minaret* narrativises ethical discipline, examining the ways in which repetition organises time, embodied action reshapes desire, and interior monologue marks moral intentionality.

This study's deliberate single-text focus on *Minaret* allows for Najwa's ethical becoming to be examined deeply rather than broadly, so that the ethical change is carefully traced throughout the narrative arc. Furthermore, the paper's non-evaluative interpretive approach to faith follows Mahmood's methodological injunction to suspend normative judgement (Eldridge, 2025; Iqbal, 2025). The analysis neither glorifies nor criticises Najwa's religiosity. Rather, it attempts to comprehend the functioning of religious submission in the text as a principle of structuring the subject. The task is analytical: to trace the narrative mechanisms through which piety becomes ethical agency. Through this literary theoretical approach, *Minaret* emerges not only as a diasporic identity novel but also as an extended reflection on disciplined self-cultivation.

The subsequent sections of this paper discuss Najwa's trajectory through moments of precarity, prayer, veiling, silence, and submission, illustrating a gradual and embodied process of ethical becoming.

## V. Discussion

At the beginning of *Minaret*, Najwa lives in a state of elite secular privilege in Khartoum. Her family's elevated status and high standing in politics create her initial identity and image of herself in terms of cosmopolitan comfort, material comfort, and social exposure. At this level, religion functions primarily as a cultural marker rather than as an ordered discipline. Najwa's main concerns are to do with romance, fashion, and status rather than ethical self-doubt.

This identity is severely shaken by the political crisis that leads to her father being executed and her family moving to London. However, the novel is opposed to the framing of exile as a basic trigger for religious conversion. The lack of privilege and economic stability that Najwa experiences over the years (as she works as a domestic servant in London) provides a condition of precarity, yet there is no simplistic presentation of trauma as a driver of faith in the text. Rather, precarity is used as a setting in which ethical reorientation can be achieved.

Researchers have often explained the reversion to Islam as a psychological compensation for the loss of the economic condition of Najwa or a desire to regain cultural stability in diaspora (Awajan & Al-Shetawi, 2021; Talafha et al., 2022). Although these readings grasp the displacement issue of the novel, they risk turning religiosity into a therapeutic reaction. A closer reading shows that the narrative reconstructs Najwa's interiority as a process of conscious reflection on her guilt and moral reflection. Her previous involvement with Anwar is not merely recalled as a romantic transgression but is revisited through a newly acquired moral perspective that refigures desire as moral deviance.

Najwa's turning to religion is not an immediate result of her exile but a gradual process resulting from steady exposure to the community of the mosque in London. The mosque is a space organised by routine, discipline, and shared worship instead of spectacle. As has been noted by critics, the Islamic spaces Aboulela depicts in her fiction are never sites of coercion; they are places of ethical purity (Salah, 2023). In *Minaret*, this precision is achieved through repetition rather than through enforcement by authority figures.

Najwa's transformation can be understood in terms of Mahmood's conception of agency as related to cultivated capacity. In this case, agency is manifested not in acts of revolt against circumstance but in the slow realignment of desire. Najwa starts feeling shame as a result of moral consciousness rather than social humiliation; vulnerability creates opportunities to develop attentiveness. This internal recalibration can be defined as a process of deliberate interaction with piety in terms of which Kolakkadan (2024) explained the subject of ethics using the example of reflexive adjustment to the ways of religion.

Notably, Najwa's domestic work in London does not serve purely to degrade her. Although it has the effect of

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materially reducing her social status, it restructures her relation to visibility. In Sudan, her identity was acquired through class-based displays; in London, she has a socially invisible status. This invisibility is made ethically productive. No longer facing the performativity requirements of elite society, Najwa starts developing an inward focus that is organised by being accountable to God instead of by being recognised by others. This reorientation challenges secular models that identify agency and public claim as the same (Saleem & Zaidi, 2022; Silva, 2022). Her emerging subjectivity is more silent, inward, and disciplined than before.

From this perspective, precarity in *Minaret* must be interpreted not as a deterministic cause but as a narrative condition. It challenges established identities and reveals the instability of identities based on status, creating space for ethical reconstitution. Najwa's transformation process is not quick and linear; it is realised through indecisiveness, ambivalence, and constant returning to religious areas. This temporality is crucial. In the novel, ethical becoming is gradual rather than abrupt, in line with Mahmood's notion of subject formation as a process and not as a discontinuous event.

Prayer organises Najwa's time during her ethical reorientation. Unlike her previous life in Sudan, which was ruled by social events and romantic anticipations, her new life is punctuated by the five daily prayers. These rituals rearrange her days, inculcating discipline in the passage of time. Prayer is represented not as ecstatic revelation but as repetition that is sustained and constitutes disposition. Passages portraying congregational prayer linger on body positioning and the rhythmic steps of standing, bowing, and prostrating. Such gestures are first enacted physically and then internalised. Here, Mahmood's description of embodied discipline can be useful; bodily practices do not simply communicate the belief that precedes them; they develop it. Actions become virtues through repetition.

This focus on deliberateness is an indication of the end of external submission to inner discipline. According to Osella and Soares (2020), who, in their article about lived Islam, referred to the persistent negotiation between ambition and failure in the formation of ethics; this is not without exception. Najwa's prayers are characterised by distraction, doubt, and self-criticism; the text foregrounds effort instead of perfection.

It is important to note that prayer does not alienate Najwa from the secular world but transforms her connection with it. Leaving her workplace to go to the mosque noticeably disrupts the linear flow of her workday. This disruption rebalances values as she believes productivity and status come from being accountable to God. This rearrangement challenges neoliberal measures of success that assess agency based on economic self-sufficiency or communal accomplishment (Saleem & Zaidi, 2022). Prayer is a temporal dislocation whereby life is organised based on transcendentalism rather than by market economics.

Practising prayer repeatedly also allows Najwa to stabilise her personal identity in the state of diaspora. Ritual regularity provides continuity in a city in which her social role and status have been reduced. This continuity does not reflect nostalgia for her former life in Sudan; it reveals prospective discipline. Najwa is proactive in recreating her desires through prayer, and she is no longer attached to the things that used to define her. Praying becomes an exercise of attentiveness, shifting her desire away from romantic satisfaction towards religious equipoise.

Therefore, prayer in *Minaret* serves as moral work. It is not a symbolic indicator of status or a narrative shortcut to redemption. It is a recurring performance that restructures time, longing, and self-perception. Najwa's subjectivity is brought back into balance through embodied repetition. Agency is achieved not through dramatic assertion but through perseverance in discipline.

Another critical point in the ethical forming of Najwa is her choice to wear the hijab. However, the text does not allow veiling to be an explicit ideological statement. Rather, the decision is made slowly, with reservations and self-doubt. The use of the veil is portrayed not as a form of political opposition or an attempt to fit into the community but as an extension of a gradual undertaking of humane behaviour.

Within Western semiotics, the veil is often understood as a symbol of oppression or resistance; such symbolic reduction hides its disciplinary aspect. According to Chaoui (2023), approaches to veiling in modern Muslim fiction tend to presuppose embodied agency rather than submissiveness. Veiling in *Minaret* rebalances Najwa's relation to visibility, placing emphasis on moral responsibility rather than aesthetic display. Therefore, wearing the veil does more than engender an external transformation. The hijab must be worn carefully in terms of posture, movement, and interaction. It influences her speech, her body language, the way she is perceived, and the way she perceives herself. This idealised control coincides with Mahmood's explanation of modesty as a developed virtue instead of a forced limitation. A modest demeanour is absorbed into Najwa's inner being through practice.

Notably, wearing a veil in London poses social risks. Najwa is vulnerable in a secular European environment characterised by suspicion of visible Islam. However, the narrative does not frame her choice as martyrdom. Rather, it focuses on deliberateness. The decision Najwa makes can be described as an alignment of will and not as a submission to an external force. Although freedom can be found in the absence of attachment to norms, as Sahar (2025) proposed in his conceptualisation of post-secular subjectivity, it can also be achieved in the conscious presence of norms.

Veiling reflects a drastic departure from the Najwa who previously depended on beauty and social charisma as validation agents. In Sudan, she relied on her looks for romantic intrigue and social validation. The hijab breaks this economy of visibility. It reduces the importance of outward appearance and shifts the focus to the value of inner virtue. This reconstruction complicates secular feminist models which contend that empowerment is expressed visibility (Silva, 2022). The agency that unfolds through Najwa is one of disciplined self-restraint rather than an amplification of self-

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display.

Therefore, veiling in *Minaret* is a practice of ethics and not an ideological motto. It is a representation of the way in which embodied repetition alters identity over time. Najwa realises her ethical becoming through praying and veiling as daily practices. Her subjectivity is not erased or theatrically liberated; it is rebuilt in disciplined alignment.

Silence in *Minaret* is represented not as imposed but as practised. Najwa's prior life in Khartoum featured casual, flirtatious, and socially performative speech. Communication was performed as a tool of beauty and finely bred self-confidence. A gradual recalibration of speech occurs in London; Najwa becomes less talkative, a more attentive listener, and more aware of the ethical weight of words. This change is presented not as oppression but as training. The novel repeatedly portrays how Najwa carefully considers her intentions before speaking, contemplating whether her utterances conform to humility and modesty. These are the instances that Mahmood defined as ethical self-regulation: the formation of desire and articulation through conscious practice rather than automatic declaration. In this case, silence is not externally enforced but included as part of a greater goal of moral perfection.

Researchers who study lived Islam have highlighted the fact that ethical subject formation frequently takes place through practices of restraint, where speech, gaze, and body are regulated (Osella & Soares, 2020). In *Minaret*, silence forms one of these practices. The text does not depict Najwa as a weak character when she does not show any resistance to small humiliations or gossip. Rather, these scenes prefigure interior reflection. She pits reaction against virtue and anger against patience. The decision not to respond is agency.

Such a representation challenges secular models that equate agency with vocal assertion. According to Silva (2022), feminist discourses have tended to position visibility and speech as the main triggers of empowerment. In these models, silence seems to be equivalent to marginalisation. However, *Minaret* upsets this balance. Najwa's silence is not the result of fear; in fact, it is often surrounded by inner power and self-possession. Her lack of external protest does not suggest a lack of will.

Importantly, the novel differentiates between silencing and silence. Silencing happens earlier on Najwa's life, when a series of political occurrences and gender demands narrows her choices without her approval. Silence is developed later as an intentional ethical practice. This distinction is crucial. Conflating them would reduce the moral agency described in the novel.

The reorientation of Najwa's relation to recognition is also achieved through silence. Previously, social affirmation organised her self-esteem. Subsequently, she becomes less concerned with external approval. By being silent, she ceases to engage in the competitive act of self-presentation and focuses on her responsibility to God rather than on social judgement. In this manner, silence adds to the process of the gradual dismantling of ego that accompanies her ethical becoming.

The most controversial aspect of Najwa's transformation is her submission to God and, in some interpersonal situations, to religiously organised power. In the liberal feminist paradigm, subordination is commonly associated with submission. Self-legislation is seen as autonomy; agency is seen as submission. *Minaret* questions this duality. Najwa's submission is always presented as concordant instead of destructive. When she talks of giving her will to God, the narrative focuses on reprieve and unity rather than depreciation. Submission becomes a reconfiguration of priorities; the will of God overrides the will of the individual. This rearranging is selected, meditated, and incorporated. It is not portrayed as external coercion.

Sahar's (2025) explanation of post-secular subjectivity is useful here. He differentiated between secular autonomy that is based on detachment and forms of freedom that are expressed in terms of attachment and obligation. In this type of structure, agency is not rejected within submission but restructures around it. The subject does not exist in isolation; it is composed by an alignment of relation. This consolidated model is reflected in Najwa's religiosity. Her will is diverted rather than destroyed.

The text supports this difference using contrast. Najwa's previous romantic feelings towards Anwar seem, in hindsight, a kind of self-denial, with her desires having been shaped by charisma and impulse rather than introspection. In comparison, her subsequent submission to religious discipline is characterised by greater self-awareness. She questions her reasons, challenges temptation, and willingly chooses moderation. Deliberation is followed by submission rather than passivity.

Recent scholarship on the agency of Muslim women has highlighted the fact that obedience and oppression should be separated. As Kolakkadan (2024) demonstrated, pious women can critically and reflexively consider religious norms while not disputing them. In the same way, Mesgartehrani et al. (2023) described forms of religious empowerment that presuppose inner autonomy and a personal sense of righteousness rather than open opposition. The path that Najwa follows appeals to these models. Her submissiveness is not theatrical defiance or internalised oppression; it is disciplined dedication.

This conflict is especially apparent in her encounters with members of the mosque community. As much as she takes religious advice, she does not give up moral judgement. The text repeatedly shows her considering her choices, doubting what she is doing, and even questioning her own integrity. This reveals conscious conformity rather than blind submission.

More importantly, submission is not romanticised in the novel. Najwa feels uncertain, lonely, and socially strained. Her adherence alienates her from some secular places and restricts her love life. Such limitations, however, symbolise

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voluntary sacrifices rather than forceful denials. The voluntariness is emphasised by the sacrificial nature of Najwa's submission.

*Minaret* adds to the vocabulary of agency by depicting submission as moral correspondence rather than oppression. Agency does not exist in acts of disruption or disobedience; it exists in disciplined submission. Obedience organises Najwa's moral life, but this organisation is inspired by intention. According to Mahmood, agency lies in the ability to occupy norms in search of virtue.

Najwa's ethical change takes place in a secular European environment, which increases its importance. In *Minaret*, London does not only represent an exile background; it is a location that is organised by liberal individualism, consumerism, and unspoken suspicion of visible religiosity. Against this backdrop, the intensification of piety in Najwa is a conscious return to modernity rather than a form of nostalgia for the motherland. Her religiosity is a sign not of a retreat to the modern world but of a different way to occupy it.

Hybridity, negotiation, and in-betweenness have often been identified as characteristics of migrant subjectivity in diasporic scholarship (Amara, 2024; Assa, 2024). Although these structures help to shed light on the spatial and cultural dynamics of the novel, Najwa's course challenges strictly hybrid models. Her moral maturation is not presented as a compromise between secular and religious self-identities; it is less and less assimilated by liberal standards of morality than by divine ones. It is discipline in her spiritual life rather than cultural fusion that helps Najwa gain belonging.

Post-secular perspectives invite this positioning by refuting the belief that modernity implies the decline or privatisation of religion. Post-secular constructs view faith not as a remnant of premodern consciousness but as a living and creative power in the present (Grenz, 2023). *Minaret* is an example of this dynamism. Najwa becomes more pious not in Sudan but in London, which hints at the fact that secular contexts can stimulate, not disintegrate, religious dedication.

Her piety does not fit within multicultural liberal tolerance. It is not represented as an ethnic marker or cultural performance. Rather, it restructures her everyday routine, time cycles, and ethical values. Prayer breaks her working day; veiling changes her appearance in society; silence refigures her social life. Through such practices, Najwa lives in London without becoming a completely submissive subject to its value system. Her moral system is pegged at a different level.

Her positioning can be referred to as counter-hegemonic belonging. Najwa is not opposed to the city and is not politically confrontational. Instead, she exists in it by looking to another moral horizon. This minor restructuring coincides with Majid (2025) perspective that freedom in some Islamic stories is expressed as having associations with God instead of being freed of bondage. Najwa's sense of dignity is based not on civic sense but on divine accountability.

In that regard, *Minaret* is involved in the remaking of feminist imaginaries. It has become common in secular feminist discourse to make the liberation of Muslim women conditional upon the relaxing of religious affiliation. However, Najwa's path suggests that moral prosperity can be reached by means of increased devotion. This does not mean that piety is a universally guaranteed path to empowerment; it means that agency may be produced by disciplined subjection without the need to adjust to liberal autonomy.

Recent reports on the agency of Muslim women have warned against confusing emancipation and secularisation (Kolakkadan, 2024; Mesgartehrani et al., 2023). Incorporating this insight into the narrative form, *Minaret* helps to build feminist vocabularies. Najwa's life does not lead to professional success, love without relations, and political action. Rather, it develops her inner consistency and ethical conformity. The novel thus redefines the parameters of fulfilment.

Diaspora in *Minaret* is no longer a displacement but a place of moral reconstruction. Having been pushed out of Sudan's class structures and political hierarchies, Najwa finds herself in a space in which she has to build up selfhood with few material resources. Religion offers order rather than an escape. Her discipline allows her to create a sense of belongingness not attached to status or nationality.

This reformulation does not only affect Aboulela's fiction. It challenges literary critics on where to leave the narrative endpoints they are inclined to privilege. When the idea of liberation is evaluated only through the lens of secular autonomy, texts such as *Minaret* seem conservative or retrogressive. However, when agency is viewed as developed ability, the novel emerges as a meditative continuum on ethical self-fashioning in the contemporary diaspora.

By placing Najwa's piety in a secular European setting, *Minaret* disproves the belief that modern Muslim women have to sacrifice faith and freedom. The novel envisions a mode of subjectivity whereby submissiveness to divine authority goes hand in hand with self-formation. This vision does not undermine feminist criticism; it extends it. It implies that the future of feminism entails embracing disciplined alignment and not only sovereign-based moral paradigms.

This paper has argued that *Minaret* reconstructs agency within the context of ethical self-formation as opposed to either resistance or emancipation. Following Najwa's transformation through precarity, prayer, veiling, silence, and submission, the novel predicts disciplined practice as the location of subject production. Agency occurs in continuity rather than discontinuity and in conformity rather than sovereignty.

This kind of reading interferes with earlier arguments in feminist literary criticism. Stories of Muslim women have often been judged based on secular, liberal standards that use independence, social statement, and lack of religious control to determine empowerment (Saleem & Zaidi, 2022; Silva, 2022). In these systems, piety manifests itself in

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forms of restraint or tactical opposition. *Minaret* disrupts this duality. Najwa's religiosity does not fit within liberal emancipation and does not qualify as covert rebellion. Rather, it typifies a pattern of moral development based on will, habit, and lived practice.

The conceptual words that can be used to capture this dynamic are found in Mahmood's reconceptualisation of the notion of agency as cultivated capacity. Instead of associating agency solely with opposition, Mahmood finds it in the activities whereby subjects constitute themselves in relation to normative traditions. Recent scholarly engagements with her perspectives underline their importance in current post-secular feminist research (Iqbal, 2025; Sahar, 2025). The application of this framework to *Minaret* shows how literature can be used to narrativise ethical habituation in a subtle way that is usually not realised in sociological discourse.

The analysis also contributes to enlarging the lexicon of feminist literary criticism. If the concept of agency is perceived only through the grammar of liberation, texts on disciplined religiosity could be misunderstood. Feminist scholarship, according to Grenz (2023), should take into consideration types of subjectivity that do not fit secular ideas of autonomy. *Minaret* provides an example of such a type. Najwa's satisfaction is not romantic or professional; rather, it is moral. Her plot progression favours enlightenment instead of triumph.

Moreover, the present reading establishes *Minaret* in the context of recent research that has recorded reflexive and deliberative piety in Muslim women (Kolakkadan, 2024; Mesgartehrani et al., 2023). These studies have proved that following religious norms does not exclude a critical approach or self-awareness. In line with this, Najwa's submission is characterised by questions, reservations, and internalisation. The moral subject that emerges is not a passive or radically autonomous subject but is formed intentionally.

Agency can be reconceived in this manner without the need to abandon feminist critique. Doing so involves expanding the scope of analysis. Acknowledging disciplined submission as a possible place of agency does not idealise patriarchy or reject structural inequalities. Rather, it opposes diminishing Muslim women's religiosity to false consciousness or internalised domination. *Minaret* encourages critics to examine the interior work through which ethical identities are forged by foregrounding intention and habituation.

This change has an impact beyond Aboulela's fiction. The writing of contemporary Muslim women usually depends on faith as an organising power rather than an ornament of culture. Attempting to read such texts in terms of secular teleology can lead to a simplification of the texts. In comparison, engaging with them based on models of ethical formation allows for more delicate interpretations of silence, modesty, and submission. Agency may thus be found in acts of congruence and containment without degenerating into the exaltation of piety or the mistrust of liberalism.

It is in this sense that *Minaret* engages in a post-secular restructuring of literary studies by accepting religion as formative rather than deformed. The changes in Najwa prove that ethical becoming can be developed through disciplined devotion in contemporary urban life. Her narrative does not dismiss feminist issues of power and gender; it redefines them according to a different moral horizon.

*Minaret*'s rethinking of agency endows feminist literary criticism with broader conceptual territory. It invites academicians to acknowledge that Muslim women's subjectivity cannot be captured only in terms of binaries of oppression and resistance. Another register of agency, which requires critical, but not theoretical, attention, is ethical self-formation, which is slow, embodied, and intentional.

## VI. Conclusion

This paper suggests that *Minaret* reconceptualises agency as ethical self-formation rather than as resistance or secular emancipation. Najwa's transformation shows that piety, manifested through prayer, veiling, silence, and submission, is not a passive form of subjugation but a disciplined process of moral alignment. Using Mahmood's theory of cultivated agency, the paper demonstrates that freedom in the novel is expressed through deliberate submission to divine authority rather than through independent self-determination. By foregrounding embodiment, repetition, and interior discipline, *Minaret* challenges secular, liberal feminist contrasts of oppression and resistance and broadens feminist literary criticism to embrace religious self-formation as a valid mode of agency.

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**Monir A. Choudhury** earned an M.A. in English Literature from Jamia Millia Islamia University, India; and a PhD in English from Aligarh Muslim University, India. He has completed prominent professional courses to earn a PGCTE and a PGDTE from EFL University, India; and a CELTA from Cambridge University. He has more than 20 years of experience in teaching and research. His area of interest is postcolonial and diaspora studies, with a special emphasis on identity politics, cultural representation, and Muslim precarity in contemporary Anglophone narratives.

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