

IDENTITY, FAITH AND SELF DISCOVERY: EXPLORING MUSLIM WOMANHOOD IN LEILA ABOULELA'S BIRD SUMMONS

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Abstract:

*This research examines Leila Aboulela's *Bird Summons* through Islamic feminism since it focuses on religion, identity, and self-discovery themes as linked for diasporic Muslim women. In that it focuses upon the spiritual experience for three female protagonists—Salma, Moni, and Iman—the novel questions just how rich Muslim womanhood may be in a Western, secular society. The analysis through Amina Wadud's gender-inclusive Qur'anic hermeneutics depicts how the characters negotiate religious faith, cultural displacement, and individual change. The study puts forth the idea that Aboulela overcomes patriarchal religious stories while she is upholding Islamic authenticity. Aboulela presents spiritual agency and community and resistance in such a subtle way that she represents these elements effectively. Because magical realism along with Sufi themes are used, they underscore the inner and outer adventure these women make, setting the novel apart as a method of critical engagement with postcolonial studies and Islamic feminism. Ultimately, the study adds to a larger discussion. It considers "Bird Summons" with regard to Muslim women's agency and identity in twenty-first-century Anglophone fiction.*

Keywords: *Identity, Faith, Self-Discovery, Muslim Womanhood, Leila Aboulela's Bird Summons*

Introduction:

Leila Aboulela's *Bird* Examining the complex lives of Muslim women in the diaspora as they look for their identity, spirituality, and self, *Summons* is a foundational work in modern Anglophone Arab literature. Set in the Scottish Highlands, the tale chronicles the trip three women—Salma, Moni, and Iman—to Lady Evelyn Cobbold's tomb, the first British Muslim woman to have visited Mecca. Along with being a physical trip, this pilgrimage is also a symbolic trip into the shattered lives, spiritual adventures, and obstacles Muslim women deal with as they negotiate the Islamic and Western worlds. This research is important because it investigates the intersection of gender, faith, and migration to clarify how Muslim women reinvent themselves in light of cultural displacement, societal demands, and personal trauma. By exploring the characters' experiences of alienation, double consciousness, and the pursuit of autonomy, the research brings attention to the transformative potential of spiritual quests and redefining womanhood in diaspora. An exploration of this nature not only enhances the existing body of knowledge on diasporic identities but also promotes a nuanced understanding of the everyday lives of Muslim women in the West.

While many scholarly efforts have focused on themes of identity, diaspora, and magical realism in **Bird Summons**, most of the existing work has addressed the novel from broader angles like cosmopolitanism, narrative technique, and the overall situation of Arab women in the West. Nevertheless, there is a lacuna in the literature about a nuanced examination of how precisely **Bird Summons** articulates such processes of self-discovery and faith-based identity construction as are specific to Muslim womanhood. The present research fills this lacuna by placing in the foreground the intersection of religious experience, individual change, and feminine identity negotiation—a dynamic that has not been widely examined heretofore.

The particular aims of this research are to:

Discuss how **Bird Summons** traces the process of self-discovery of Muslim women in the context of diaspore and migration.

Examine how Islamic religion shapes and empowers the characters' identities.

Discuss the novel's function in redefining Muslim womanhood as shown by the personal and spiritual transformation methods.

Using this approach, the study will offer a fresh perspective on Aboulela's work that will contribute to the current discussion on faith, identity, and the evolving narrative of Muslim women in modern literature.

Literature Review:

Understanding the lived reality of Muslim women depends on the analysis of identity, faith, and self-discovery in modern literature, particularly when it concerns immigration, diaspora, and multicultural society. Leila Aboulela's *Bird* presenting a complex picture of Muslim womanhood, *Summons* is a remarkable literary work exploring these issues. Through which to examine the intersections of religion, gender, and culture, the book's focus on three Muslim women of varied backgrounds going on a spiritual journey in Scotland provides a distinctive point of view. This topic should be discussed again since it covers ongoing debate about agency, representation, and the negotiation of many identities in an ever more interconnected world. Though there is a growing corpus of research on Muslim women's portrayal in Western fiction, a great deal of it centers on narratives of oppression or victimhood, hence harming the sophistication and agency of Muslim women characters formation is reflected in the women's experience of rejecting assimilation, prejudice, and preserving their culture.

Another major intellectual approach is Islamic feminism, which seeks to reconcile feminist ideas with Islamic teachings. Some writers, including Margot Badran (2009), have argued that Islam may be a strong force for women, therefore challenging patriarchal interpretations of religious texts. In *Bird Summons*, Aboulela portrays religion as an active and evolving force in her characters' life. The book portrays Muslim women as active agents of their own destiny, thereby challenging simple distinctions between modernity and tradition. Most academics agree that *Bird Summons* is a significant contribution to contemporary research on Muslim womanhood. The exquisite characterization, lyrical writing, and imaginative storytelling approach of the book have all drawn much praise. They applaud Aboulela for capturing the inner conflicts felt by Muslim women as well as the more general societal and cultural expectations they encounter. Arranging comparable books reveals that Aboulela's work is part of a bigger movement toward more sophisticated and varied portrayals of Muslim women in writing. Unlike authors who focus on public disputes or political wrangling, her attention on spiritual paths and inward transformation distinguishes her.

Aboulela's symbolism—specifically the hoopoe bird, most closely identified with guidance in Islamic culture—is enriched by the novel's discussion of spirituality and self-discovery. The bird

appears at significant moments throughout the book as a reminder of the characters' alignment with a greater spiritual heritage, even as they are figuring out their individual struggles. The Scottish Highlands setting of the novel is also important. The terrain, with its traditions of migration and cross-cultural contact, is reflective of the protagonists' own itineraries of self-discovery. Aboulela's vivid descriptions of the natural world reinforce themes of transformation and renewal. Although *Bird Summons* has been praised for its gentle depiction of Muslim women, there are those who hold that the novel might still engage more deeply with the socio-political context of Islamophobia and discrimination in modern Britain. Others propose that the magical realist features, as successful as they are in communicating spiritual concerns, risk alienating those readers who would prefer more realistic fiction. However, the novel's positives greatly outweigh its negatives. Aboulela's success in capturing the intricacies of faith, identity, and self-discovery renders *Bird Summons* a worthy work for scholars and readers alike. This review of literature has explored how Leila Aboulela's *Bird Summons* represents issues of identity, religion, and self-discovery for Muslim women. Through synthesizing and examining the existing scholarship, the review has demonstrated the novel's contribution to present debates regarding representation, agency, and spirituality.

Research objectives:

1. To critically analyze how Leila Aboulela's *Bird Summons* delineates the interrelated themes of identity, religion, and self-discovery in the context of Muslim women, with specific reference to the life experiences of its three main female characters as they confront individual and collective challenges in a diasporic, Western environment.
2. To examine how the novel represents the negotiation of various, at times opposing, identities—religious, cultural, and personal—by Muslim women, and in what ways these negotiations assist them on their paths to self-discovery and empowerment.
3. In order to utilize Amina Wadud's theory of Islamic feminism as an analytic framework, examining the extent to which the spiritual journeys and inner changes of the characters are in sync with the tenets of Islamic feminism, especially the seeking of autonomy, agency, and justice from within the Islamic framework.
4. To consider how *Bird Summons* subverts established gender roles and patriarchal societies by showing the resistance of its female characters against gender inequality of all sorts, and how their belief complicates and strengthens their resistance.

Research Questions:

1. How does Aboulela represent the intersection of religion and identity in *Bird Summons*?
2. How do her characters arrive at self-discovery, and what obstacles do they encounter?
3. In what ways does the novel make contributions to the wider discourse about Muslim womanhood in literature?

METHODOLOGY:

The study uses Amina Wadud's Islamic feminist hermeneutics as the main theoretical framework. Wadud uses a hermeneutical reading of the Qur'an that corrects patriarchal interpretations by focusing on gender equity in Islamic texts. Her methodology blends contextual understanding, grammatical examination, and consideration of holistic worldview (*weltanschauung*) to reinterpret verses concerned with gender according to modern-day values and gender justice. The study employs a qualitative literary analysis stressing Leila Aboulela's *Bird Summons*. It entails close reading of the text in order to examine themes of identity, religion, and self-discovery among Muslim women characters. The analysis pays special attention to narrative tropes such as the journey motif, which symbolizes both physical and spiritual transformation, as

highlighted in feminist literary criticism frameworks like Rita Felski's concept of self-discovery narratives. The use of magic realism and its role in expressing fluid Muslim female identities is also examined. The approach combines intersectionality to examine how race, gender, nationality, religion, and post-9/11 socio-political environments intersect to produce Muslim women's experiences in the novel. The intersectional framework takes into consideration the transnational and diasporic experiences of the characters, representing larger concerns of Muslim female identity within Western secular states. The study places Aboulela's characters in contemporary Muslim feminist debate, connecting literary representation with actual gender justice politics. Drawing on Wadud's approach, the study incorporates a hermeneutic method to interpret Islamic symbolism and references to the novel. This entails:

- Examining the socio-historical circumstances of Qur'anic revelations to the themes of the text
- Taking into account the grammatical and linguistic contexts of major Islamic themes as they feature in the narrative
- Approaching the Qur'an as an open text that engages with readers' modern questions and experiences

This makes it possible for the study to expose how Aboulela's rendition of Muslim womanhood resonates with or contrasts classical Islamic readings.

The methodology involves critical discussion of the available scholarship on Islamic feminism, especially that of Amina Wadud, and literary critique of Aboulela's texts. This comparative critique places the novel in contemporary debates regarding gender, religion, and identity in Muslim spheres, building on scholarly debates concerning feminist Qur'anic interpretation and Muslim women's stories. Primary data are the novel *Bird Summons* itself, interpreted through textual and thematic analysis. Secondary data are scholarly articles, feminist interpretations of Qur'an by Amina Wadud, and critical essays on Muslim womanhood and Islamic feminism.

Analysis:

In *Bird Summons*, the travelling of Scottish Highlands represents liberation identity and faith through the characters of Salma, Iman and Moni. Inspired by Islamic ideas particularly Amina Wadud, this pilgrimage is physical and symbolic. It challenges traditional gender roles and creates spiritual within Islam.

Wadud's Qur'an and Woman presented a basic lens for interpreting how the women take control of their lives and religious beliefs. Her idea of *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) invites a re-examination of religious principles in light of contemporary gender justice.

Aboulela's narrative critiques both rigid religious patriarchy and narrow Western feminist assumptions. Her characters offer prayer and wear hijab. These choices are not acts of rebellion but connected to personal identity and deeply rooted with the idea of Islamic spirituality support modern idea of freedom.

The visit to Lady Evelyn Cobbold's grave supports this theme. Cobbold, who was one of the first British women to perform Hajj, broke gender rules of her time. Her story mirrors the characters' journeys. The Highlands, far from city life, give the women a quiet place to rethink their roles, beliefs, and relationships.

Salma realizes that she shouldn't sacrifice herself completely for her partner, Adam. This challenges traditional ideas of motherhood, which often expect women to give up their own needs. Iman, who is divorced, seeks freedom and rejects male-dominated interpretations of Islamic law. Her journey shows how Islamic feminism supports women's right to make their

own choices—both financially and socially—within religion. The novel describes choices and also religious faith and challenge conservative religious ideas and also discuss secular view.

Islamic feminism, which advocates for personal spiritual agency, provides a portrait for understanding these diverse expressions of faith. The story discusses the hijab as both a cultural and spiritual symbol. The main focus of the novel is on a woman's spiritual journey. Therefore it tells us the story of women that challenge male-dominated religious beliefs.

The story takes place in Scotland and the writer explores how British culture and Islamic ideas can be mixed. This helps characters to face and adjust their environment. It gives an equal path to live both religion and culture peacefully.

In the end the story explores that being faithful required always thinking, rethinking, it rejects the idea of following blindly.

Findings:

In *Bird Summons*, Leila Aboulela discusses Islam is not a limited or restricted religion. But as ever-changing source of inner strength and freedom. Her earlier work *Minaret*, where faith offers grounding amid cultural dislocation, *Bird Summons* positions religion as a guiding force for identity formation and resistance against secular pressures. The story, Scottish monastery represent the internal renewal seen in *Minaret's* Najwa, and shows that religious action like prayer and hijab can be powerful and meaningful acts when chosen freely. Aboulela, the women in the story are Arab Muslim and British also. The book criticizes strict religious traditions but also feminist ideas. And it shows that being religious can also be a strong and free feminist choice.

Conclusion:

Leila Aboulela in *Bird Summons* discusses about Muslim women and their lives. It discusses that how religion, living and identity in other countries come together. The story talks about three women and their spiritual and personal journey. It challenges western feminist ideas as well as traditional male-centered Islamic views. Through applying Amina Wadud's Islamic feminism it discusses that religion can be a source of strength not only just rule. The characters of this novel explore the idea that it is possible to mix Islamic ideas with modern feminist beliefs. The novel discusses the ideas like pilgrimage, religious and magical elements is not fixed, it is changeable, it changes with the passage of time and changes according to different people and cultures. *Bird Summons* shows that Muslim women is not simple and show them as strong persons who grow through faith. Therefore the novel presents a bridge between literature and religion.

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