



# (Neo)Orientalism and Violence in the Postcolonial Arab Novel: A Neo-Patriarchal Reading of Leila Aboulela's Fiction

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## ABSTRACT

This paper intends to examine the ways in which the colonial encounter with the British occasioned the racialization, sexualisation of Arab female bodies, the institutionalization of male domination which has led to the decline of the woman's status and the brutal repression of the basic rights of the Arab woman. The continuation of this dreadful situation today despite the end of colonisation attests to the entanglement between the colonial and the postcolonial in the dynamics of gender in contemporary Arab societies. The systematic violence and oppression of the Arab woman in the Arab societies has its roots in the European imperial project. This has led to the binarization of gender identities around male hegemony as the transfer of power to national elites merely ensured the continuation of colonial structures that dehumanises the Arab woman. Postcolonial Arab societies still remain deeply marked by representation of race, religion, body and gender even after colonialism. The Arab woman in the Sudanese Arab writer-Aboulela, in her novels *Minaret* and *The Translator* is not a description of reality but an ascription of a label that is supposed to be dominated. Within this spirit, patriarchy has mutated itself into neo-patriarchy as a modern form of domination that Arab women suffer from. Since, the family is the smallest unit of a state, neo-patriarchy gives power and control to elderly women over younger females by subjugating them culturally and socially. The violence inflicted on these women is both physical and psychological that puts the existence of the Arab woman at peril.

**KeyWords:** (Neo)Orientalism, Neo-patriarchy, sexuality, violence, and dehumanization.

## Introduction

The colonial contact was not only aimed at appropriating colonial lands and riches but also to control the body and mind of the colonized- an eroticization of the colonial enterprise. Hence, the contact with the former colonial masters reinforced and even institutionalized the domination of the Arab woman. After the British colonial masters had left the colonies, the Arab men wanted to continue to reproduce, enjoy and dominate the Arab female without any resistance. Patriarchy is the most pervasive and powerful force of the traditional Arab societies in which men oppress, exploit and control women. Neo-patriarchy is the new form of power and control structure which is guided especially by older women, but supervised by men in the family. This paper will equally illustrate how the sexuality of Arab woman is controlled. Issues such as virginity, marriages and pre-mental sex within the context of Arab culture and civilization will be brought to focus. The violence inflicted on these women is both physical and psychological which dehumanizes the Arab woman. Since the aim of the colonial contact was the domination and exploitation of the colonized peoples, women find themselves in an even more uncomfortable position.

As Mc Clintock (1995) has demonstrated from the study of British colonialism, it is impossible to separate race, gender, and class in the understanding of the Imperial process. She points that the enterprise of possession and domination cannot really be accounted without a deep incursion into power dynamics around **gender. She states: "Imperialism cannot be fully understood without a theory of gender power.** Gender power was not the superficial patina of empire, a decisive mechanics of class or race. Rather, gender dynamics were **from the outset fundamental to the securing and maintenance of the imperial enterprise"** (McClintock, 1995:67). It is now infused and reinforced in the society through different social structures; one of which is neo-patriarchy<sup>1</sup>.

On this basis, masculinity and feminism must be understood within the framework of power dynamics **as well as social roles in Aboulela's fiction. It shows how despite the distinctly different cultural setting of the novels, the Arab feminist message remains the same; Arab women are shown as occupying secondary roles in their neo-patriarchal societies. Aboulela's novels demonstrate how elderly and affluent Arab mothers confine** ordinary Arab women to severely traditional female roles constructed and determined by their neo-patriarchal, cultural and social system. As a result, the main female characters are denied a voice, an identity and even physical freedom. This denial is occasioned by violence which leads to trauma and tragic outcome of their lives.

#### Neo-patriarchal violence and trauma

This section will look at how elderly and affluent female characters are seen as being complicit in **dominating other women in Aboulela's** *The Translator* (1999) and *Minaret* (2005). Although they themselves have been victimised by certain patriarchal aspects in their own lives, the same women can also use patriarchal systems of power to suppress and dehumanise younger women or women from a lower strata of society. Neo-Patriarchal women are produced especially in domestic spaces, and they may also use this space to facilitate their oppression of other women. From my analysis, a few female characters in our corpus tend to stand out due to their complicity in perpetuating patriarchy even on their family members and neighbours, instead of liberating them from these barriers. This neo-patriarchal society is one in which power is held by male heads of households and older women. There is also clear separation between the 'public' and the "private' spheres of life. In the 'private' sphere the neo-patriarch female enjoys arbitrary power over all junior males, all females **and all children. Though examining the national, urban and rural spaces in Aboulela's selected fiction, we** would analyse how these texts reveal the spatial production of patriarchal femininity, as well as the ways these older women use the domestic space to oppress other women. As put forward by Beauvoir:

Women lack concrete means for organizing themselves into a unit which can stand face to face with the correlative unit. They have no past, no history, no religion of their own, and they have no such solidarity of work and interest as that of the proletariat. They live dispersed among the males, attached through residence, house work, economic condition, and social standing to certain men - fathers of husbands - more firmly they are to other women. (Beauvoir, 1952:19)

In neo-patriarchal societies, the women in the family are identified through their ties with their menfolk. If a woman attempts to break free from a male relation, she will often find about herself identified by her relationship to another elderly woman who will reinforce the system.

**In Aboulela's** *The Translator*, the female protagonist-Sammar suffers domestic violence at the hands of her aunt, Mahasen. When Sammar returns from Sudan from Scotland, the narrator gives a vivid account of her constant squabbles with her aunt-Mahasen. The squalid room reserved for her in Khartoum speaks volume of **Mahasen's efforts to oppress Sammar physically and psychologically: "she lived in a room with nothing on the wall, nothing personal, no photographs, no books just like a hospital room...never imagining the quarrel with Mahasen"** (Aboulela, 1999:12-13). The representation, of the domestic space therefore serve as engaging sites **for the spatial exercise of power. Mahasen's home in the novel is considered by Sammar as a place of**

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'neo-patriarchy' was first used by Hisham Sharabi in his book (1988). Neo-patriarchy means "new forms of governance. He used this term to explain the relationship between modernity and patriarchy in the context of the Arab world. He further discussed the stages of patriarchy from historical and structural standpoint. Berendt (2010) described that patriarchy is not a fixed (static) phenomenon because it recreates or reinvents itself after a time period in the face of capitalism, social and cultural settings of the Arab society. Patriarchy is shifted to neo-patriarchy and this new form of governance has an ultimate purpose to suppress and oppress the woman at the household level. It is a distorted form of traditional patriarchy which is based on male dominance. Neo-patriarchy is operated through women, but men have the supreme authority over women at household levels. Thus, this new form of governance is guided by women to dominate other women but supervised by men. (See Berendt, J. (2010). *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. New York: Vintage. -Sharabi, H. (1988). *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in the Arab World*. New York: Oxford.)

**entrapment and oppression. Sammar's dependence on Mahasen, allows neo-patriarchal power to transform her home into an oppressive space. Even Sammar calls her neighbour by her name-Lesly, Mahasen reproaches her in the most vulgar manner: "She is not your aunt" (32). Sammar is unable to be defiant by refusing to give a surname to her son: "For the time being she said that choosing between her husband's name and her father's name didn't give a woman much of a choice" (36-37).** Sammar's opinion as related by the narrator informs us on the futility of the Arab women trying to break away from certain patriarchal structures which is intended to define her place in the society.

In classic neo-patriarchy, subordination to men is offset by control which older women have over younger women. This means that some women also prescribe to patriarchy in the way they control younger females. In terms of older women dominating other women, some particular examples are present in the novel, for example, Hanan abuses her child, and prevents her from playing during the day in the courtyard. However, female characters assert their power over other women, and in the way older women control younger women. These characters tend to have an overbearing personality, as shown by their verbal utterances and actions of mocking and threatening other female characters, whether overtly or indirectly. In particular, the dominant female character in *Aboulela* (1999) who appears to ridicule other women continuously is Mahasen. Due to the trauma of being under constant attack and abuse from Mahasen, Sammar cannot longer perform her house chores. The narrator explains:

**She poured sour milk in her aunt's tea and had to make another cup. She sent Amir to school without making him brush his teeth, left the fan running in the empty bedroom all morning. At work, she felt that she didn't care, it didn't matter at all that her adult students could barely read and write.** The illiteracy rate was 60 or 82 percent depending on who was right, and today she had no energy or desire to reduce it. (Aboulela, 1999:166)

In the neo-patriarchal home, Mahasen has all types of labour power that can control, and to dominate **Sammar. She sees her as a domestic maid who must do all the house chores. But Mahasen's home is not a concrete locality associated with notions of shelter and comfort where she should invest her time and energy in order to give meaning to her existence. The influence of males such as Tariq can be considered a woman's most critical resource, it is imperative for the mother to ensure life-long loyalty from her male offspring. Such examples of favouritism towards the male heir can indeed be seen in Mahasen's indulgence in insinuating Sammar killed her son by stressing him to death.**

**The gender bias towards the female offspring is certainly apparent in Aboulela's narrative. In the case of Waleed, Mahasen tries to help him by pawning jewellery despite his secret marriage to an English girl, and the fact that he sends money to England. However, the amount is never 'enough'. The family believes that it is their duty to help a male heir, by all means, but a female child is forced to fend for herself. For example, girls are denied the opportunity for further education, as indicated by Mahasen's insistence that college education "was an unnecessary expense for a girl (138). Due to this old-fashioned view, Rachel has to stay at home and wait for marriage proposals. As we have seen before, Rachel is a victim of domestic violence (afflicted by Hanan), but she herself condones certain patriarchal attitudes, which are evident in the favouritism of male children to the detriment of female children. One such example of favouritism can be ascertained in the description of her over-caring affection for her male child: "The day that Hannan prevented Mahasen from beating her (and Sammar had murdered her only son), Mahasen insisted Sammar should return to England. (Aboulela, 1999:168). Indirectly, her favouritism towards her only son causes Sammar to be dismissed from the school she was teaching in Khartoum since she could no longer put in enough efforts to save her job. This is evident from Mahasen's fury towards Sammar:**

**I know what happened, her aunt went on, her voice and the steady roar of the air cooler. 'I know why you came back. They fired you, didn't they, because you didn't do the work well? Don't think I'm fooled by this story of you going to Waleed and sending off a resignation letter or the rubbish you said about being home sick for your country. Foreigners don't stand for nonsense, I know. Their countries wouldn't be so advanced if they did...You a liar and you killed my son. (Aboulela, 1999:170)**

From the above quotation, we get the impression that after the death of Tariq, Mahasen seems to have **transferred all her frustration on Sammar. However, at the same time, she appears to keep quiet about Waleed's suggestion that Sammar is gradually suffering from a mental breakdown, as if to insinuate that she doesn't care if Sammar eventually gets mad. In the narrative, Mahasen is described as a serene, almost aristocratic old woman in a starched sari with diamond and ruby visitors (166). This description indicates a regal, middle-class personality for the neo-patriarch. It might also be argued that the description also prepares the readers for a character who is class-conscious. Mahasen appears to be someone who thinks highly of herself and her family and she has a secret habit of ranking other people around her, usually putting them in a position much lower than her social hierarchy. Tariq describes how Mahasen would boast about her family's credentials: "her aunt's**

face is so serious, this was something important, necessary, not a game. She could drink and drink and never gets full" (Aboulela, 1999:103). Indirectly Mahasen's boast about her family would put an end to other people's conversation, thereby silencing them and making them aware of her superior position with regards to others. The political potential of an Arab woman's urge to suppress another women inserts itself into Arab female genealogy and the rememorating of the past. These memories express an insider's perspective to colonization/globalization, as opposed to the national enthusiasm of the protagonist. In Aboulela (1999), this would be the case of Nazim, Nahlia's daughter-in-law. Aboulela describes the matriarch as secretly thinking, "Nahlia never Nazim for a long time. But she despised her anyway. They would be part of a bigger churning whole projects for her to hurry up and finish before she left" (106). The way the author describes Nahlia's stream of thought indicates her seemingly exalted position compared to Nazim's origin as the daughter of working-class parents. This particular obsession with class differences is also emphasised in Mahasen's action of overtly insulting Sammar at a given moment. In other words, Sammar's constant breakdown is occasioned from her inability to occupy both spaces (hostile Scotland and the restrictive attitude of Mahasen in Khartoum). This situation points towards a certain thinking on Mahasen's part as other women such as Sammar always have to work to please her whenever she wants. Indirectly, such a treatment could also be considered as a way of reinforcing the neo-patriarchal enterprise to keep the village girls silent and dominated. Mahasen is therefore another 'Big' Woman who deifies her son Tariq and despises her daughter-in-law Sammar. Mahasen goes to the extent of calling Sammar "you are useless" (169). This particular scene shows to us the extent of Mahasen's behaviour as it reveals another side of her personality which has been unseen and unheard all these years. After finding out about the affair between Tariq and the 'filthy coolie' (157), her usual serene persona is like a mask waiting to be taken off as she starts to voice her anger and all sorts of obscenities towards Sammar. Mahasen's act of abusing Sammar to the point of calling her 'you have just become an idiot' (169) could be described as a silencing act, and the abuse itself seems to reduce Sammar to something almost inhuman with her vow of Sammar haven killed her son. While Mahasen's actions of belittling and abusing other people due to class and age differences are indeed corroborative with her background of experiencing domestic violence herself. After the separation of Nailah and Nazim, we can see how Mahasen further strives to silence her own daughter, Dalia rather than help the latter to build a new life.

The family plays an important role to fortify neo-patriarchal ideology through the process of reinforcing societal rules and order. Nancy Armstrong in *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* argues that: "Arab mothers therefore train their daughters to be submissive, fragile and good home managers. Any contrary behaviour from an Arab lady towards these prescribed rules is often met with brutality and violence" (99). As an Arab woman, Sammar is therefore brought up weak and fragile, and she needs a man in her life to make her stronger. But due to her Western education in Aberdeen; she needed an educated and young man and not just any type of man. When Ahmed Yaseen and old man proposes to marry her, she refuses much to the dismay of Mahasen. However, her aunt, Mahasen gets angry because in a conservative Khartoum society, it's an aberration for a woman like Sammar to stay without a husband. The Sudanese society abhors ladies without husbands and attributes the blame to the parents for not bringing up their daughters well. According to Mahmood Saba in *Politics of Piety*.

The struggles between being a part of the collectivist society of Sudan and an educated woman from the West is always a chilling reality for the returnee. Thus, in a collectivistic society like Sudan, whenever a person thinks of doing something, he should think of the consequences that may not only affect him but his family and the community as well. This is what most often Arab women are afraid of, they are afraid that the family will consider them as traitors for falling in love with foreigners and refusing to marry native Arabs without their consent. While in individualistic societies such as England, people value their independency and the right to the pursuit of their happiness over community concerns.

Due to the severe neo-patriarchal society of Sudan where Mahasen's oppressive machinery is ever present, Sammar, alternates between both positions causing her to favour the one she misses. She idealises each place when she is not in it. When Sammar is in Scotland, she misses being in Sudan and when she goes to Khartoum, she keeps on comparing it to Scotland. This hybrid identity of Sammar caused by the inhospitable space occasioned by the violent treatment of Mahasen. This is also seen when Rae comes to Sudan and asks Sammar to marry him. Her responds is a succinct example of the effects of neo-patriarchal violence on the Arab woman: "if I was someone else, someone strong and independent I would tell you now, I don't want to go back with you, I don't want to leave my family, I love my country too much" (Aboulela, 1999:198). This shows Sammar has been oppressed by Mahasen to the extent that she is unable to make her own decisions. Her confusion between what she says, what she wants and her desire to please her family and community is contradictory. Sammar is a hybrid who lives in two worlds but who doesn't fully belong to any. Sammar's action of leaving

without saying goodbye to her own family probably indicates how Mahasen has succeeded in silencing her into oblivion. Even when Rae is in Sudan he realises that Sammar talks very little and she often resorts to silence as a way of answering him- an attitude **she didn't have when she was in Scotland**. The Western culture that was dominant during and after colonialism has resulted in the creation of a generation that is detached from their native culture and feels like outsiders. The low status given to Arab women during the **colonial period legitimised their inferior status and eventual domination after independence**. Wahleed's warning for Nazim to spend less time with Dalia shows the former's rejection of her own daughter. Things seem to get worse for Nahlia, as emphasised by Wahleed in a few sentences of Nazim, When Tariq dies of **asthma, his death is described as total loss for Mahasen's family and the beginning of Sammar's troubles**. Not only is Sammar marginalised during her lifetime; she is also marginalised after the death of Tariq. The kindness of Hanan towards Sammar is made ugly by Mahasen, symbolising a final act of dominating. The narrator states:

**She had been passed on a whole wardrobe of Hanan's clothes that were too tight for her after having the baby, didn't fit anymore. And it was also true, that she had no pride. The clothes, when Hanan offered them, had made her happy. They were loose on her, long. Hanan had been nice, she had said, as Sammar tried each thing on, looking at herself in the full length mirror, turning this way and that, 'everything looks lovely on you, Sammar.'** Now her aunt was making it all dirty, wanting her to feel ashamed. (Aboulela, 1999:169)

The first generation of Arab women in the novel such as Mahasen gives extreme importance to neo-patriarchal social norms, and others succumb to them. The first generation in the family most probably refers to Mahasen and Rachel and we can see how the two of them seem to adhere fiercely to the old traditions and ways. **In Mahasen's case this is evident from her actions towards other women in the novel, and how she does not fight back despite being her husband's punching-bag**. As for Rachel, we can ascertain that she upholds particular social norms, although there are instances in the narrative which show her rebelling in small ways. **In the narrative, Mahasen's obsession with Sammar's presence, causes her to try various ways to attract her attention**. When her efforts seem to be unfruitful, she then decides to become violent and abusive even to the least things she does. Her constant mental exile hoping Rae was around to soothing her pain and make her **feel better amidst Mahasen's rejection can be seen as some sort of rebellion**. For Mahasen, she is totally against her marrying a total stranger like Rae and worst still a non-muslim. **Mahasen's mission is to instil in Sammar total submission and if possible through sheer force and violence**. This pushed Sammar into hallucinations and **she also suffered from psychosis in Mahasen's house**.

The entire philosophy behind neo-patriarchy is power and control. Aboulela's *The Translator* illustrates some of the ways this control is reinforced. However, the novel shows that the internalisation of neo-patriarchal restrictions by the women through their training at home and later at their husband's home makes women submissive and obedient. This in turn gives power and control when they are older to control and suppress other women. While the control over women in the natal family starts right from birth of a girl child, it is later reshaped after marriage. This is illustrated in Aboulela (1999), when Sammar becomes unhappy during her time in Aberdeen, she resorts to translating in **Rae's department and using a code name when she travels to Egypt and Sudan**, so that certain people will not know about her problems. Sammar is depicted by Yasmin as feeling 'sad' when her Rae finally arrives to escort her home (26). This probably can be described as **the second act of regarding her as a 'weaker sex'**. In such an insular community, **Yasmin's stubborn decision to encourage Sammar to go to Egypt in order to interview terrorists, reveals Sammar's humble upbringing**. She is told she must go or she loses her job, this plunged Sammar into a profound silence and agony. Mahasen seems eager to equate Sammar's continued silence with madness, as she can ascertain that: **"you are mad-blind idiot"** (145). As such, we can see various instances in the text where Mahasen appears to mock and ridicule Nahlia, Nazim and Sammar, causing problems and further silencing them. One particular instance occurs when Nazim and Nahlia arrive from London at the airport. Earlier, Amir was reminded that he needs to behave well for his cousin were coming home. However, the two get in to a fight over a piece of curtain at the arrival hall and Mahasen seems embarrassed by the behaviour. She scolds them, but Sammar is dissatisfied with her responses: **"savage, it is uncouth"** (166). Even when Sammar has finished cleaning Dalia; Mahasen still wants to cause problems without any just cause, she scolds at Sammar: **"it shows how low you are, with no manners, no respect. Now you have this one child and you don't even want to take him to England and look out for his benefit"** (Aboulela, 1999:169). We can see that she belittles Sammar's efforts at raising the children with her description of the Dalia and Amir as unmanageable and wild and she seems adamant that the children should travel to England for a brighter future. But when Rae arrives in Sudan, he is very proud with the way Sammar is bringing up the children and it encouraged him to want to marry her. The scene above, which occurs a few weeks before Rae's arrival, shows Mahasen's aggressive behaviour as she threatens to punish Sammar if she doesn't go back to England: **"You should go back to England, work there and send us things"** (169).

The neo-patriarchal enterprise also illustrates that after marriage, the mother-in-law plays an important role in re-socialisation/re-integration of the Arab woman according to set patterns of the neo-patriarchal structure. This type of socialisation is **not much different from what she had experienced in her parent's home**. It is the new process of reintegration that makes the new woman realize that her status in the family is low and **she is a "second class citizen" in the family. It is therefore incumbent on her as a second grade member of the family to follow and respect the rules and regulations of the family without questioning**. In Aboulela (1999) Mahasen instructs Sammar to do all the house chores and take care of both Amir and Dalia at the same time. Sammar who is born in Scotland is not accustomed to such hectic work load and when she does it to the best of her ability, Mahasen is not satisfied. The narrator explains Sammar's ordeal:

Dalia sat up and rubbed her eyes. Sammar began to clear the plates off the table and to sweep the rice off the floor. She could feel her aunt watching how insufficient she was, clumsy in her movements, slow. She felt cold, her bones cold and stiff, not moving smoothly, not moving with ease. She wanted a bed and a cover, sleep. She wanted to sleep like she used to sleep in Aberdeen, everything muffled up and grey, curling up, covering her face with blanket, her breath warming the cocoon she had made for herself. (Aboulela, 1999:171)

**Indirectly, this particular scene also informs us of Mahasen's ambition of oppressing Sammar as she is obsessed in her quest to demean and control. Sammar's conscious detachment from her son by leaving him behind in Sudan and her inability to mother the child is the resultant of the gruesome oppression orchestrated by Mahasen. Her predicament as an exile is thus an attempt to escape from the social, emotional and hegemonic influence of a neo-patriarchal Sudan. It is after this incident that the reader comes to the realisation that the conflict between Sammar and Mahasen is the second most important conflict in the novel after the major conflict which is the incompatibility of Sammar and Rae's religious beliefs that makes their matrimonial union impossible under Islam. Mahasen focused all her fury at her public humiliation on Sammar: "she was weak today. Because of last night's dream and she had annoyed her aunt. She couldn't remember clearly what she had done to annoy her aunt, to trigger all that came out of her" (Aboulela, 1999:174). To free herself from such false accusations from her aunt, Sammar relied on Rae to have some emotional support which is much needed to overcome her trauma. Rae tells Sammar: "you have won me to your side in quarrel you have with your aunt" (174). Rae's statement forms the bedrock of how neo-patriarchal domination can affect an Arab woman to the extent that when she moves abroad she is haunted by such a repressive cultural system.**

Moreover, Yasmin is terrified when she discovers that Naidaa has gone to Sudan to see her parents. **Naidaa's action indicates that she is not ashamed to 'publicly admit her relationship to her parents who had earlier abandoned her for disrespecting her culture, something Mahasen has never thought would happen. The latter realises that staying in London is a risk to her children back in Sudan who might grow up in a culture that doesn't take into consideration the aspirations of a girl child. She realises that Naidaa needs to be silenced before much worse things happen. She in her attempt convinced Naidaa to go with the male child but the female should remain in Khartoum. It wasn't hard for her to portray Naidaa as the person actually responsible for the well-being of the children. Aboulela uses the simile 'like a poor child' to describe how Mahasen uses her dirty and ruthless manipulative skills to paint Naidaa as the guilty party in front of Yasmin. This arouse Naidaa's anger and makes an appeal via her power as the neo-patriarch of the family to make Naidaa pack her bags and leave and return to England. As a punishment, Naidaa is forced to spend her final days away from her children and later falls into severe depression. By subverting the truth, Mahasen has fulfilled her role as a moral police by making Naidaa pay for her past and present sins. As Mahasen's niece, she is forced to pay for her transgression by travelling without the female child. Sammar and Naidaa are not only marginalised during their lifetime, but all their final days. Through Mahasen's intervention, Sammar's and Naidaa's voices appear to be silenced and obliterated. The actions and reactions of Sammar and Naidaa in the narrative provide us with different views of women's collusion with patriarchy. Aboulela does not present subordination as a stable, unproblematic condition from which resistance, necessarily, proceeds. Instead, Christian Barbara in *Arab Feminist Thinking: The Neo-Oriental Period* affirms:**

Mapping varying degrees of submission and defiance against, and collusion with the dominant. We **have observed how certain patriarchal structures have been so deeply ingrained in female Arab's mind that she vehemently wants female children to be indoctrinated in Arab culture and tradition. This informs us that the matriarch knows that children who are brought up on western societies are aliens to their culture and therefore a danger to the neo-patriarchal structures that need continuity.** (201)

Aboulela therefore describes how Mahasen seems to be contended with the children staying in Sudan but later contradicts her stance when she insists Sammar goes back to England. Not only is Mahasen suppressing Sammar and Naidaa to preserve the hegemonic structures, She seems to silence them into

believing that there are advantages in giving advice or interfering in other people's affairs for the good of the community.

**Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005) demonstrates the training of women in a neo-patriarchal set up both in Sudan and in London. If women are not trained to be submissive, they will resist and the much cherished male dominancy will no longer prevail. In neo-patriarchal societies, men desire to keep their control and they take the support of other/older women to be able to sustain this control over women. In Aboulela's *Minaret* uses the concept of 'Space' and 'Location' and the ways in which Najwa's oppression is orchestrated and the trauma she suffered due to neo-patriarchal violence. It is a matter of textual intent that the novels begins in Khartoum (Najwa's ethnic origin), because this 'space' becomes the reference point for Najwa's suppression. In fact one of the most striking incident of female domination by the neo-patriarchal structures in the novel is when Najwa was in Khartoum before the coup d'état. In the beginning of the novel, the author presents a classic example of a neo-patriarchal family. Baba, the father of the house constantly complains of Omar and Samir's laziness. He does nothing as the father to bring his sons to order but focuses so much attention on Najwa who is very hardworking both at home and in school. Even Najwa's mother accepts outdoor activities for the males but Najwa is trained and indoctrinated to always be indoors while studying books about the place of women in the Arab culture. Najwa reveals her dissatisfaction why Omar and Samir with poor grades should go to the University while she has good grades but will stay at home. Najwa's mother gets infuriated why Najwa should compare herself with her brothers, and as a female she should always learn to be silent:**

**'Why Samir and not me?' she asked Baba as we ate lunch. We ate from china and silver... 'Because Samir didn't get good enough grades' said Mama... 'So, is it fair', I said, that the one who gets poor grades gets to go abroad and the one who gets the good grades stay here?' Samir was now moving to Atlantic College in Wales doing IB, which was like 'A' levels. (Aboulela, 2005:13)**

**Aboulela's protagonist cannot understand why she should be punished because of her sex despite her brilliant performance at school. However, Najwa fails to understand that, the belief in male superiority and female inferiority is the essence of neo-patriarchal thinking. The male dominated institutions in the Arab world like the neo-patriarchal family and male-oriented beliefs result from sex-stereotyped views based on female inferiority inscribed in Arab culture.**

In neo-patriarchal societies, the formidable force of tradition that denies women any control over their lives is at the heart of the matter in *Minaret*. Najwa descends from a daughter of rich Sudanese politician to a maid in London. Unable to find a suitable job in London, she decides to work as a maid in the family of Lamya and Dr. Zainab. Lamya mistreats Najwa and considers her a 'poor little girl from Sudan'. Najwa is not even permitted to use household items without the consent of Lamya. Lamya is afraid because her authority and control over the household matters more than Najwa's freedom. Although Najwa is devastated by the death of her parents and her brother Omar in jail, Lamya and Dr. Zainab show little concern about her difficult situation. Lamya devalues Najwa in order to feel better, she sees herself superior and different from Najwa. She has no right to even ask questions as a maid; this accounts for the reason why Najwa always conceal her ethnic origin when asked when she is from, in order to avoid reprisals and scorn. The house chores given to Najwa by Lamya shows her determination to maltreat and keep her abbey. Lamya tells Najwa:

**You have to put on this tape for Mai when she eats, otherwise she won't eat'. She gestures vaguely towards a tape recorder on the kitchen counter 'unfortunately we don't have a dishwasher'. A pile of dishes stands up in the sink. She shows me where the vacuum cleaner is kept, the brooms and the mops. 'This floor', she trails her toes on the clay-red plastic tiles, 'is so difficult to clean, me and Mama are fed up with it'. (Aboulela, 2005:58)**

**To Najwa's greatest dismay, Dr. Zainab doesn't intervene to reduce her workload. Najwa earlier believed that with the presence of an old grandmother, she would advise her daughter to treat her kindly. Upon seeing Najwa working, Dr. Zainab instead adds her more task to do. Here, Najwa is seen as a subaltern, the helpless Arab female who has no right to complain. The above excerpt shows that older women play important role in the household power and control in giving lessons of obedience before the start of the marital life, giving the message that they are subordinate to the husband and the family. In the Arab culture, it is universally accepted by the women that their obedience and compromising attitude guaranteed peaceful life in the family. This means women are being indoctrinated to tolerate the oppression for their own existence and the greater good of the entire family, the community and nation at large, a kind of neo-patriarchal thinking at play here.**

**Moreover, face with repressive structures in Lamya's house, Najwa turns to her love affairs in London to have some comfort and solace. Najwa desires Anwar will marry her; for Anwar's social low social status mattered no more she is now a nigger in Britain. Apart from Anwar, Najwa also wishes Tamer, Lamyar's brother, to marry her. While chatting with Shahinaz, Najwa imagines how happy she would be if she is a concubine to Tamer's family, and complains about the bitter reality that she should settle for in this modern times. Following from this logic, whenever Najwa refers to London, it is always imbued with feelings of suppression and pain. In**

this respect Najwa's attachment to Sudan through her memory and frequent flashbacks can be regarded as a return to her 'roots'. This inevitable upholds Aboulela's perception of London as embodied in Najwa's characterization. Aboulela perceives Sudan and London as defined and fixated locations that suppresses the Arab female psychologically, socially and culturally. Najwa while undergoing suffering in Lamya's house, her memory takes her to Sudan where she explains the unreciprocal relationship between her and her father because she is a girl. Her father concentrated his efforts on Omar while she "was going to get married to someone who would determine how the rest of my life flowed. I am glad Baba didn't live to see what happened to Omar. Or even to me" (68). In Sudan, the neo-patriarchal structures are ever present. Her mother compels her to stay at home and never leave because she felt she had some emotional feelings for Amir, who is of low social background. Her mother vehemently refuses any relationship with a pauper like Amir: "Don't risk your reputation and waste your time on someone who is never going to be a suitable husband for you...your father would never approve...it would be such a humiliation for you and us" (31).. The female protagonist-Najwa's troubles do not begin with her childhood. Rather, the responsibility of marriage is imposed upon her when she was just on the verge of adulthood. Under classic neo-patriarchy, girls are given away in marriage at a very young age into households headed by their husband's father. **There they are subordinate not only to all the men but also to the more senior women, especially their mother-in-law.**

In Arab culture, marriages are determined by parents with little or no consent from the children. **Women's plights become double or even triple when they get married. This is not to say that all marriages end up as a complete failure.** However, we get the examples and knowledge of the torture done on wives by their husbands in most cases. Seen in the larger context, violence against women is not the result of random, individual acts of misconduct, but rather deeply rooted in structural relationships of inequality between women and men in the society. The deeply rooted neo-patriarchal values and norms and the prevailing social attitude that violence against women in a private domestic space, is a huge impediment in curtailing the ugly practice. In *Minaret*, Randa, in spite of the fact that she belongs to an affluent family with political background and the proper education that she has, she faced brutal torture from her husband, AL-Sid. Since her childhood **Randa was taught to stay away from boys and men. "and yet, clearly a man was the only future available to Sudanese girl"** (32). She states: **"despite the fact that our mother has divorced her first husband, we were taught that marriage was a sacred and irrevocable institution. If a husband turned out to be a brute, it was the wife's duty to persevere until she changed his character"** (44). **A broken marriage was a reflection of a woman's failure. From childhood, Randa was taught that it is the woman's responsibility to make her marriage successful. Even if her husband is not a gentle man, she has to do her best to adjust his character. This kind of notion is nothing but a neo-patriarchal ideology that is technically and forcefully infiltrated into women's mind. In order to keep their stance strong, men force women to follow such rules and restrictions. It is always in his best interest that a man regulates and mistreats a woman. Hence, women are forced to comply with the social norms. Even Lamya's first marriage at the age of seventeen was the consequence of this social norm. Initially, it was her urge to get out of the restrictive environment at her home. As mentioned earlier, during her childhood, her "personality failed to develop. My mind became a sanctuary for secret thoughts of escaping from this household. But for that, there was no other goal but marriage"** (40). Hence, she accepted the twenty- seven years old's proposal in the hope of getting a little freedom. When at first her mother had turned down the proposal because he was not well off, her best friend insisted her into accepting the proposal saying. **It won't be so easy for her to find a boy who'll love her as does. "I suggest you agree to the proposal. You still have three daughters for whom your position will be stronger"** (55).

In *Minaret* (2005) these moments of unease with regards to oppressing Arab female characters occur in the aftermath of the changes that disrupt Najwa's orderly life. For instance as Najwa tries to locate her first sexual experience with Anwar, she realizes she is dislocated in a variety of contexts. Firstly, while pondering over her sexual experience she reveals her anxieties about different treatment of sexuality in Sudanese and British cultures. Najwa feels the Arab world is full of hypocrisy and double standards for men and women. Najwa, recounts the dreadful activities of Arab girls paying Doctors to restore their virginity. Some even commit abortions for fear of reprisals and for fear of not getting married with a child gotten out of wedlock. Najwa says:

**He was right about the sourness but the guilt didn't go away. His stories of perspective Sudanese brides paying for operations to restore their virginity depressed me. He had a friend, a doctor, he said, who was doing quite well performing illegal abortions on unmarried girls. 'You would think them demure' he said. 'Covering their hair and acting coy, but all that is hypocrisy, social pressure. Do you remember the girls who went missing whose photos were shown on TV? They weren't lost, these girls, they weren't missing- they were killed by their brothers or fathers then thrown in the Nile'. (Aboulela, 2005:151)**



Accordingly, honor is meant to be protected at all cost as it dictates the standards of behavior and the common values of masculinity and femininity demanded by the society. Premarital sex and adultery are examples of behaviours dishonoring men, they are serious infringements of neo-patriarchal norms in Arab societies. Consequently, if a woman goes against the rules, she is either secluded or forced into marriage or when she is rebelling and refusing, she is killed to eliminate the dishonor that she has brought to the family. Therefore, violence against Arab women may appear in different forms, degrees; motives and contexts, across the East and West regardless of class or religion. The girls guilty of the cultural restrictions go through uncouth means such as **operations to restore their virginity and abortions in order to protect the family's honor and themselves from shame and eventual death.** After some time, as she realizes her abusive relationships is tiring **her, she accepts a low paid job in Auntie Eva's house.**, another cycle of female hegemony and pain as Najwa constantly suffers from being the inferior sex in London.

However, the inclusion of multiple voices in *Minaret* does not necessarily indicate its success in alteration of the received conceptions about the places and people in the eyes of the readers who may have **little familiarity with the gender crisis of Najwa. Indeed, Aboulela's intent of melting geographical frontiers** (Khartoum and London) does not necessarily mean the removal of culturally or racially erected barriers. Moreover, potentialities of the in-between characters such as Najwa, Anwar, and Randa do not undercut the complicities of hybridity, the political and economic causes that underlie global movements and the reality of postcolonial and transcultural contexts as site of unequal power relations with various levels of power hierarchies in local and global contexts. Therefore the question of the resilience of Orientalist frames or reference about Arab Muslim women, in a wider global context of neo-Imperialist relations cannot be analyzed without looking into the intricacies of larger power and knowledge discursive formations as well as historical specificities that impact each relationship. In *Minaret* the readers encounter Westernized Orientals **orientalizing the culture they are living in, while at the same time inflicting on themselves a 'civilizing mission'.** Randa, Lamya and Anwar are insiders of the culture they are criticizing yet they regard themselves as above it, and thus see it as their duty to elevate western values on socialism, sexuality and liberalism and to view common people especially Arab women as backwards. The western culture that was dominant during and after colonization has resulted in the, creation of a generation that is detached from their native culture and feels like outsiders. The Sudanese elite follow the western norms by inheriting their language, ideology and **traits. This creates a sense of displacement, as they can't align themselves with the natives and instead look at the Western culture with admiration and strive to imitate it.** A sub-culture is thus created among the eastern educated youths and its products are natives with a western view, clashing with their native mentality and views about culture. This western approach gives a certain privilege and sense of superiority over the natives. Najwa, the heroine, the **daughter of a prominent Sudanese bureaucrat and belongs to an elite that doesn't only inherit the British rule but also their culture that is perceived as superior.** It is only when she is forced to live the ordinary daily life in London that she thinks totally lost and begins to feel the need to belong to any **form of stable identity. Najwa's sense of identity is torn between her past and present as her life is not steady,** it keeps fluctuating. The changes she is subjected to are not only in geographical terms but also in social class. **She realizes an ambivalent place in a culture that she doesn't belong, she states: "for the first time in my life, I disliked London and envied the English, so unperturbed and grounded, never displaced, never confused"** (Aboulela, 2005:299).

In London, Najwa is lost and alienated, she holds to what seems familiar in an unfamiliar setting. Najwa always looks for someone or a place to have a sense of comfort. For example, when Anwar comes to London, she holds on to him because he reminds her of Sudan, although he accuses her father of corruption. After being orphaned, Najwa finds solace and companionship within the Arab Muslim community. Here, she is able to identify herself within a long existing identity. The earlier part of the novel, the Arab Muslim community fails to protect Najwa and give her the necessary comfort and peace she does need. She is regarded as a disadvantaged-no husband, no certificate and lack of religious upbringing. Due to this awful situation, Najwa **turns to Tamer, Lamya's kid brother,** and hopes he will marry her. Najwa does not quickly realize that their **social status and class differences become hindrances in the colonial centre, which can't bring them together. It is true that Tamer never looks beyond Najwa's occupation** but also sees her as an oppressed, ignorant woman. Through such stereotypes held by Lamya and Doctora Zainab who even pays Najwa to leave her son: **"she picks up the check, she moves her hands emphatically, this is the compensation for you because you are not going to work for us again and because my son has made you promises he is incapable of keeping. You will have nothing to do with our family again"** (Aboulela, 2005:224). Through such stereotypes held by Doctora Zainab and Lamya, Aboulela is thus emphasizing how it is not only Western audiences who stereotype Arab female Muslims, as claimed by some critics, but such discrimination and oppression exist everywhere even within the Arabs and it is not common that divisions exist inside Arab Muslim communities. This is further corroborated through the image of secular, elite and educated Lamya, who in a house party she organizes

invites a belly dancer in the hope to entertain her Western friends but she appears in full hijab. This led to laughter and mockery by her western friends to the extent that she had to remove her dresses one after another to be accepted. **Lamya's Western visitors cheer and enjoy the music because she is no longer wearing the hijab: "the centre of the room is all hers now and she is moving slowly as if doing a striptease, unbuttoning her blouse to peals of laughter, untwisting her wrap-around skirt"** (Aboulela, 2005:192). Aboulela has thus proven how the Arab community in London are not united and they don't cooperate to help the oppressed and downtrodden Arabs like Najwa who is unable to grasp the reality of the diasporic Arab communities. The calls for interaction and mingling often go unnoticed, as for closed interaction with other Arab ladies may not always be an essential part of an immigrant's life. **Taken by fear of contamination that threatens their imaginary identification with purity, the immigrants consciously refrain from interaction, as a result of which they live parallel lives, living in England and still remaining outside it. In other words, the English chronotype does not correspond to the time and space they are living in. Even if they live 'inside' the imperial centre, they assert their difference and refuse to be part of the English nation.** However, later on Tamer changes his mind and proposes to marry Najwa much to the displeasure of his mother, Dr. Zainab and his sister Lamya. When he informs his family, Lamya tells Najwa she was not interested if she gets married to him, she in turn was pacified by saying it was just her nervousness regarding this big event. Actually, the fact is, as he had already presented his intention to the family, he was now bound to adhere to the previous decision. The act of changing his mind and following his heart every time he felt like was not acceptable by the elders because the society will then have a negative impression about him. The consequence of this forced marriage was that she became bored of this relationship and it became difficult for her to perform her duties in Lamya's house. **Lamya upon seeing Najwa holding and kissing Tamer scolds and slaps her: "What is this! She is swollen with how dare you, how dare you, she is more shocked than ever...She takes a step towards me, lifts her arm and strikes me across the face...It is Tamer erupting as blood pounds in my ears. It's Tamer shouting at her not me"** (Aboulela, 2005:193). Apart from cultural and social pressures, there is also the issue of marriage. In the Arab culture; a large number of females are married to men who are far older than the female themselves. In Najwa's case, she was older than Tamer and this made Dr. Zainab very angry. The effects of such Violence is occasioned by the fact that, a union where a woman is older than the man and the woman has no right of choosing her mate, range from depression, low self- esteem, to living a life of complete misery. Lamya further accuses Najwa for seducing his brother and wants to marry Tamer because she is after the wealth of the family. Even Dr. Zainab cries out because her only son wants to marry a girl from a low standard. Dr. Zainab pays Najwa to leave her son alone, for the 'unholy' relationship with her son has caused him to fail his exams and she is old enough to be his mother. **She tells Najwa 'You will take this money and stay away my son! Just take it and leave him alone. You are ruining him...If you take the money, leave him alone"** (Aboulela, 2005:224). Here, we see neo-patriarchal ideology at work, where the mother is the one to decide the wife of her son and where is not allowed to marry a woman who is much older than him or from a poor social background. Thus at her age, Najwa was supposed to have been married with children and not chasing a man much younger man than her. **As she did not want to marry an old man, she even escaped from her uncle's place in order to get rid of this forced marriage.** Later on, she returned and agreed to marry the Anwar in the hope of getting a little freedom that she always wished for, just as Tamer wished the same. Yet, she was denied all the possibilities to marry Tamer. **She remained like a prisoner in Lamya's house. This is because, being a female, it is her responsibility to please her everyone in the family, and it does not matter whether she was comfortable or not. Moreover, as she was much older than Tamer, and didn't revolt against the family for exercising restraint and oppression on her.**

The dependency on males and older women in the Arab tradition helped us to envisage the family as a state. Where those who wield power (husband and mother-in-law) exploit the peripheral relations (females, daughters-in-law) in the family structure. When finally she could not tolerate this torture anymore, Najwa escapes from Lamya's home and went back to the streets. According to Lamya, "all husbands often beat their wives" and her mother said, "her husband often beat her" (246). Moreover, we read about Lamya's father assaulting her mother. This is because, from generations to generations, men have seen their fathers hit their mothers. Hence, the women internalize this habit and impose violence on women thinking that this is the only way of keeping women under control and thus the only way of exerting their power and importance in the family and society. However, the abusive nature of Lamya and Dr. Zainab soon revealed when one day Lamya's golden necklace got missing and she falsely accused Najwa for stealing it. Najwa is traumatized and frightened for she didn't steal the necklace She was saying all this very calmly and in a low voice, when suddenly Lamya got infuriated and she said, "how dare you raise your voice when you are speaking to me, where is it, you low woman?" (Aboulela, 2005:98). Hence, for the first time she then gave her dirty looks and while Najwa with the aid of Tamer were searching for the lost necklace, Mai, Lamya's daughter: "comes out of

the sitting room. She is holding the pearl necklace in her hand. Tamer laughs. There's your missing necklace, Lamya!" (99). Najwa unable to bear the terrible situation runs out in the street when it is raining. There is no doubt that neo-patriarchy and fake religious beliefs are the main reasons for Arab women's plight, but there is also one section of this neo-patriarchal system where the dominance of women reaches its extreme form. Tamer blames the neo-patriarchal system for the extreme form of torture on women. According to Lamya, it is their right to subjugate females, whether it is their wives, sisters, housemaids or even girl children. Thus, it turns out that women are greatly subjugated in neo-patriarchal system as well and they accept their subordinated position to some extent because the male chauvinistic society, especially as they have the ability to justify their every action. Husbands and mothers-in-law think that it is their right to dominate and to abuse their wives and **any attempt on the women's side to avoid such oppression and violence is a poor sign of rebellion. Hence, according to men's law, such women should be punished. Najwa's devastating condition in the Dr. Zainab's home is as a result of the Arab culture and not necessary because of Islam.** From that point onwards, Najwa faced continuous verbal and physical abuse from Lamya and family for various reasons. Tamer tried to stop the violence on her by being by her side which calmed her down. He even touched her feet and begged for forgiveness. She felt pity on him and tried to forgive her but the excruciating pain would not let her forget the torture inflicted. Tamer also successfully convinced her not to reveal the bad side of his family to anyone. He tells Najwa that Lamya's ill attitude is because she hardly prays and she keeps bad company. Najwa finally succumbs to the neo-patriarchal ideology by convincing Tamer to go home, for his mother has the right to **decide what he has to study not him deciding: "so I smile 'you really must go beg your mother's forgiveness. You hurt her by leaving the house"** (Aboulela, 2005:228). Najwa's acceptance of Dr. Zainab's supremacist attitudes form the foundation of novel. According to Najwa, physical abuse was not her crime – it simply affirmed her own inadequacy of falling short of her mother's definition of ideal Arab muslim. This is the point on which she was afraid that the society would not accept her anymore and to think the worse, Lamya would hunt her down and kill her.

Aboulela in *The Translator* and *Minaret* intend to demonstrate how works of art reveal how race and gender operates by employing different strategies and by demonstrating the inner limits, porous borders, and tricky ambivalence of the circulating categories. By so doing, the writer urges us to realize that 'difference' is inscribed on the subject by exterior social forces and accordingly interiorized by the self. She also bears witness to the subject's ability to resist and repudiate those constructions and demonstrates that literature can effectively contribute to their detection and neutralization. As the novels demonstrate, Aboulela understands literature as a space where mainstream discourse can be contested, where ordinary people with their daily lives finally get recognition and are allowed to speak up, where a more democratic and responsible knowledge and more humane and positive representations can be developed. Through her writing, Aboulela critiques neo-patriarchal power, openly disagrees with it and articulates an alternative narrative.

## Conclusion

To conclude, neo-patriarchal enterprise is often implemented through physical and psychological violence of the Arab woman. This paper has attempted to answer questions such as the complex relationship between neo-patriarchy and violence in the context of **Aboulela's fiction. It explains the intermingled ties between customs, neo-patriarchy, honour, female sexuality and the established norms in family and community.** The analysis demonstrated that the physical and psychological violence perpetrated against women is cultural in origin, rather than justified by religion. It was argued that 'honour killing' does not have its roots in Islam, in terms of religious doctrine and the testimonies of religious leaders. Such violence is more associated with tribal mentalities where a female as an individual does not exist outside her community, but has rights and duties towards the members of the clan. It has to do with cultures and customs where females through preserving their sexual chastity are given the responsibility of preserving the honour of their male relatives, the reputation of the family and the respect of the community. It is significant to note that whether emotionally abused, culturally relegated to second class citizenship status, marginalised by older and affluent mothers, the women in these oeuvres under discussion share one common tragic bond: their lives are fraught with pain, misery and an ever permanence of death. The sufferings, pain and angst of Aboulela's female characters under neo-patriarchal structures is symbolic of all the dehumanization that Arab women go through. It is however, not only marriage that condemns women to this dreadful existence in the novels but the power structures and other practices play a significant role in reducing Arab women to second grade citizens in Sudan.

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