

**CONTEMPORARY MUSLIM CHARACTERS IN CIHAN AKTAŞ AND
LEILA ABOULELA**

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THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
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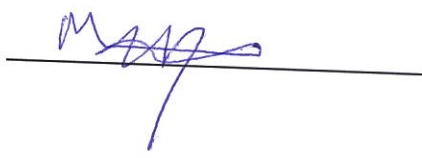
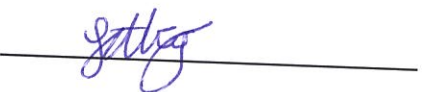
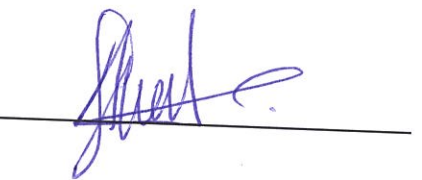
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This is to certify that we have read this thesis and that in our opinion it is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts in Cultural Studies

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ABSTRACT

CONTEMPORARY MUSLIM CHARACTERS IN CIHAN AKTAŞ AND LEILA ABOULELA

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Throughout history, many have spoken and assumed on behalf of Muslim women ignoring her individual and feminine voice. Subsequently, the misrepresentation of Muslim women in macro narratives, especially after 9/11, allowed the marginalization and Islamophobic attacks on Muslim women globally. As a response, Muslim women writers like Leila Aboulela and Cihan Aktaş have deconstructed the discourses depicting Muslim women as a collective identity in their literary works and reconstructed contemporary Muslim female and male characters demanding individuality.

For this reason, I have analyzed the individual journeys of contemporary Muslim female and male characters in Leila Aboulela and Cihan Aktaş to show the participation and difference of present Muslim women writing. Moreover, this dissertation made it possible to see the everyday life struggles of Muslim women reconstructing their Muslim identity in Britain and Turkey despite the negative portrayals of Islam and Muslims widespread.

Key Word: Islam, Muslim Women, Women Writing, Cihan Aktaş, Leila Aboulela.

ÖZ

CİHAN AKTAŞ VE LEILA ABOULELA'DA ÇAĞDAŞ MÜSLÜMAN KARAKTERLER

Yavaş Bulut, Mahbube

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Tarih boyunca Müslüman kadının bireysel ve dışil sesi görmezden gelinerek, Müslüman kadın adına birçok konuşma yapılmıştır. Özellikle, 11 Eylül sonrasında daha fazla artan makro söylemlerin yanlış Müslüman kadın tasvirleri, Müslüman kadınların daha fazla dışlanmasına ve İslamofobik saldırılara maruz kalmasına neden oldu. Buna bir cevap olarak, Leila Aboulela ve Cihan Aktaş gibi Müslüman kadın yazarlar, Müslüman kadınları yalnızca “kolektif kişilik” olarak yansıtan söylemleri eserlerinde, “bireyselliğini talep eden Müslüman kadın ve erkek” karakterlerini göstererek, yeniden inşa ettiler.

Bu bağlamda, Müslüman kadın yazarların farkını ve katkısını görmek için, bu iki yazarın eserlerindeki Müslüman kadınların ve erkeklerin bireysel yolculuklarına odaklandım. Bu tez, İslam ve Müslümanların geniş manada olumsuz tasvir edilmelerine rağmen, Müslüman kadınların Türkiye ve İngiltere’deki Müslüman kimliklerini yeniden yapılandırırken günlük yaşam mücadelelerini görmeyi mümkün kılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İslam, Müslüman Kadınlar, Kadın Yazımı, Cihan Aktaş, Leila Aboulela

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Dedicated to all my beloved ones...



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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Islamophobic attacks have rocketed globally, and the New Zealand terror attack in 2019 led to at least 50 killings and wounded worshippers praying in the mosque¹. These deadly killings are the outcome of post-9/11 negative depictions of Islam and Muslims widespread in Western media, macro narratives, and discourses. According to professor Sahar F. Aziz (Aziz, 2012), Muslim women suffer more than men from discrimination since they have been misrepresented as “meek”, “powerless” and “oppressed” for years and after 9/11 seen as potential “terrorists”. Related to this, Professor Leila Ahmed refers to the noticeable change after 9/11 and states that themes such as Muslim women oppressed with their veil or burqa became phenomenal topics in America and the West (Ahmed, 2011, p.194). Consequently, these topics spread like a disease in various platforms and led to further marginalization and discrimination of Muslims, especially Muslim women.

The estrangement of Muslims and Muslim women, in particular, has a long history²; however, problematizing the marginalization of Muslim women theoretically started with Edward Said’s Orientalism, in this case; the West seeing Muslim women as an “Orientalized concept” to actualize colonization (Said, 2003). Referring to Said’s Orientalism, Professor Lila Abu-Lughod, who worked at least 30 years with Arab

¹ Some of the headlines related to the rise of Islamophobic attacks globally : <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/new-zealand-shooting-attack-muslim-hate-crime-rise-uk-a8836511.html>, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/03/summary-attacks-muslims-western-countries-190316150024125.html>, <http://theconversation.com/christchurch-attacks-show-islamophobia-is-real-deadly-and-spreading-around-the-world-113786>

² Lila Abu-Lughod explains that it was called “gendered Orientalism.” Many defined after women through Edward Said’s Orientalist concept. Abu Lughod refers to sample works of: Dohra Ahmad, “Not Yet beyond the Veil: Muslim Women in American Popular Literature,” *Social Text* 27, no. 99 (2009): 105; Rana Kabbani, *Europe’s Myths of Orient* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986); and Meyda Yeğenoğlu, *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

women in the Middle East, asked: “Do Muslim Women Need Saving?” (Abu-Lughod, 2015). Initially, Abu-Lughod claims that there has been “a moral crusade” in the West “to save” the “oppressed Muslim women”, however, her thirty years of experience showed the opposite; Muslim women are surprised that the Westerners believe Islam oppresses Muslim women. Moreover, the hypocrisy of the Western experts neglecting problems related to women at home in Western countries and going instead to the Middle East to “save” Muslim women is heavily criticized in this work. Furthermore, Abu-Lughod describes how Islam is shown as a threatening culture by the West and points explicitly to feminists,

The media enthusiastically took up stories about the status and suppression of women. Feminists joined the cause. Popular memoirs by Muslim women who exposed the plights of their benighted sisters in Iran, Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia became best sellers in the West. Women’s organizations headed off to Afghanistan alongside a battery of humanitarians and legal experts. Later, these groups set up shop in Iraq, a country in which, ironically, women had previously enjoyed the highest levels of education, labor force participation, and even political involvement in the Arab world. (Abu Lughod, 2015, p.7)

Eventually, Abu-Lughod conceptualizes her work as “writing against culture”; deconstructing the culture misrepresenting Muslims and seeing them as the most “rest”, as the opposite pole of the West (Abu-Lughod, 2015, p.6). Referring to the literary scholar Dohra Ahmad’s concept (Ahmad, 2009), Abu-Lughod analyzes texts and so-called studies depicting “Muslim women as abused” and calls it “pulp-nonfiction”³ since women are portrayed in these books as collective identities suffering from Islam or trying to escape. Moreover, Abu-Lughod’s contribution is not only showing how specific texts have prevented understanding and questioning “real” problems oppressing Muslim women (such as governmental, political or financial authorities in Egypt) but also is a self-criticism inviting scholars to study against the mainstream

³ In chapter 3 “The Fantastic World of “Pulp Nonfiction”, Abu-Lughod refers to works showing Muslims as abused and trying to escape as “pulp-nonfiction”: Azar Nafsi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Asne Seierstad’s *The Bookseller of Kabul*, Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s *The Caged Virgin* and its sequels.

discourses suggesting experts to ask these women within instead of assuming on behalf of them.

In a similar vein, Professor Saba Mahmood studying feminine piety movement in Egypt deconstructs the incredible dominant narrative “Islamic Fundamentalism” and shows Islam as “Revival”. According to Mahmood, liberalism is a concept Westerners perceive life and expect others to view life from this perspective; however, it is blind to other experiences existing in different ideologies like the case of the Muslim women movement in Egypt (Mahmood, 2005, p.5). In other words, the word “freedom” has not the same meaning for Muslim women who understand the self and their role in life through their obligations to God. After all, these women are not interested in political equality or gender hierarchy but have their unique struggles with modern life and Muslim morality. The concept of “oppressed Muslim women” is a political subject taken-for-granted in feminist studies and therefore is amenable to see new forms of plurality, contingency, and diversity. On the contrary, professor Mahmood uses the paradigm of negotiation referring to Foucauldian governmentality and claims that negotiation provides the chance to see the transitivity, the infinite range of concrete situations instead of entrapping the agency (Muslim women) as subservient. Thereby, she proposes a different understanding of religious self-fulfillment bringing a new vision to feminist theory by suggesting a re-examination of religion and gender from the perspective of the women within instead of applying dualistic frameworks like liberal or oppressed. Mahmood’s study influenced many, including Lila Abu-Lughod since this work debilitates the previous feminist theories based on antagonistic frameworks and suggests an inward orientation in theory as well as in the self.

Related to the above, it can be understood that narratives are not innocent as they can, for instance, inoculate a contagious disease called Islamophobia where the other is discriminated and silenced to death. To find a remedy, I started questioning whether there are Muslim women writers reconstructing the image of Muslim characters,

especially the female characters, allowing these characters to tell their everyday life problems. Starting from this point, I realized that two authors from different parts could help me more to give a better insight and as I grew up in the West and reside currently in Turkey, I researched the Muslim women writers in Britain and Turkey. In chapter 1, I inform about the two authors and their works. Briefly, they are local informants thus; being female, Muslim, a fiction writer, writing about the everyday life stories of Muslims in Britain or Turkey, about religion and clashes with secularism, emphasizing the individual interpretation of faith and Islam through the lens of Muslim women in the West and Turkey. Thus, Leila Aboulela, the Sudanese-British author, reconstructs the image of Muslim women in the Western world by telling the stories of simple and everyday lives of Muslim women living in Britain while Cihan Aktaş reconstructs the image of Muslim women in Turkey. Instead of the negative and backward image haunting over the Muslim women, both authors constructed compelling and intellectual female characters.

Moreover, both authors depict unique, various samples of female characters following their journeys. They highlight individualism, deconstruct the collective identity prescribed in Western narratives, and do not prescribe idealism to any character. It is possible to follow how they criticize collective discourses and struggle to find the self through religion. Accordingly, Saba Mahmood claims that Muslim women define themselves through faith and also hold on to their identity as a Muslim struggling with the clashes of modernism and within Muslim circles. Since both authors reconstruct uniquely Muslim women characters questioning, exploring, participating actively in public, and not depicting them as “the angels in the house” or oppressed by collective discourses, it could be stated that Muslim characters are empowered in these works. I would also like to point out that both authors should be respected in their fields, although I am comparing their works to provide a global insight. After all, women differ and cannot be seen as a single object and need to be respected. Admittedly, Jacques Derrida states that,

We must respect the idiom of each one of us, not only the so-called national idioms, but each person's idiom; this is his or her way of speaking, of being, and of signifying, while at the same time of communicating and translating. Consequently, we must translate. The task of translation is not incompatible with respect for the idiom- on the contrary. (Derrida, Borradori, Cherif, & Fagan, 2008, p.81)

Thus, to respect each person's idiom, I have put effort to translate and compare the contemporary female characters and their unique struggles in the works of Leila Aboulela and Cihan Aktaş. To understand the diverse backgrounds in both countries and to provide information about the authors, I have briefly introduced the authors in Chapter 2. Then, in chapter 3, I have analyzed the empowerment of contemporary Muslim female characters in the works of both authors referring to feminist pioneers such as Helen Cixous (Cixous, Cohen & Cohen, 1976) and Virginia Woolf (Woolf, 2012). Their iconic works have been covered in many feminist studies because Helen Cixous explains why women should write women and the importance to find a proper feminine language in a male-dominated world while Virginia Woolf questions the creation process of female writing in a world where people are unaware of the power of women and are anxious about her productivity, and skeptical about her creativity. Finally, in Chapter 4, I have examined the male characters in the works of both authors and have found similar patterns in their writings questioning the immaturity and irresponsibility of the modern Muslim man refusing to be self-critical and to re-identify his Muslim identity in a modernizing and globalizing world.

Correspondingly, I came across many works defining Muslim women writers as "feminist" or "Islamist" or "Islamic feminist" and have tackled these definitions since they limit the productivity of these authors. Related to this topic, I have read prof. Miriam Cooke's "Women claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature" to study the reaction and writing back of Arab Muslim women to traditional feminist discourses (Cooke, 2007). In the aftermath, I came across prof. Esra Mirze Santesso's book and followed her discussion on Cooke's definition of Islamic feminism, which is

criticized since it overlooks the varieties by unifying all Muslim women around a single idea (Santesso, 2013, p.84). I also learned from prof. Jasmine Zine (Zine, 2006, p.1-24) (sociology and Muslim studies) and Zahira Sarwar's study (Sarwar, 2014) that there is not a single definition for Islamic feminism and it seemed incorrect to define these authors as "Islamic feminist", "Islamist", "Islamic activist" etc. Instead, I refer to them as "Muslim female writers" in this study not to limit but to differentiate them from the mentioned definitions.

Regarding the methodology, this study is highly influenced by Professor Saba Mahmood's definition of "Taqwa" to open inquiries to dominating "frameworks" and "binaries" restricting and labeling Muslim women as a unified body or single truth (Mahmood, 2005). Therefore, I have traveled in the concepts in the works of both authors while reading and taking notes on similarities or differences and analyzed the repeating patterns in the novels and short story books of both authors being fully aware that each has a unique way of writing. Professor Mieke Bal, a Dutch cultural theorist, defines this kind of travel as,

At first sight, the object is simpler than anthropology's: a text, a piece of music, a film, a painting. But, after returning from your travels, the object constructed turns out to no longer be the 'thing' that so fascinated you when you chose it. It has become a living creature, embedded in all the questions and considerations that the mud of your travel spattered onto it, and that surround it like a 'field'. (Bal, 2002, p.4)

Therefore, this study can be seen as a travel in the concepts and definitions, through the self, and making it possible to recover and remake the self finding hope in this living creature. In other words, in a post-structural world where many grounds are discussed and deconstructed, there is a need to find hope for the future traveling in the concepts of scholars giving hope instead of hopelessness. Thus, instead of following a binary framework or an antagonistic approach, it seemed better to start a study without biases and judgments. For this reason, my travel started opening new inquiries with the

curiosity to find multiple answers rather than a mindset where the answers were already there. Related to this, Saba Mahmood offers hope through her post-structural approach about criticism with the focus on the gaze,

Critique, I believe, is most powerful when it leaves open the possibility that we might also be remade in the process of engaging another's worldview that we might come to learn things that we did not already know before we undertook the engagement. This requires that we occasionally turn the critical gaze upon ourselves, to leave open the possibility that we may be remade through an encounter with the other. (Mahmood, 2005, p.36)

Thus, interpretation and the way we look at things (the gaze) are significant since it can limit but also broaden the horizons. In a world where the other is neglected and misunderstood, it gives hope to start an inward orientation within ourselves.

Regarding the previous works, I found numerous studies and examinations based on the works of Cihan Aktaş; however, I will mention the ones related, such as prof. Bahtiyar Aslan's *Kusursuz Piknik'in Bilinci (the consciousness of a perfect picnic)* examining the marginalization of female characters in Cihan Aktaş short story *Kusursuz Piknik* through various types of collective consciousness bothering the characters (Aslan, 2015). Secondly, Prof. Münire Kevser Baş in her article "Kimlik Arayışından Bireyselleşmeye: Cihan Aktaş'ın *Seni Dinleyen Biri* Romanında Çiftsesli Söylem" analyzes the novel *Seni Dinleyen Biri* focusing on Meral, the female protagonist questioning her identity and her self-rationalization mentioning the collective discourses in a dialogue through the theoretical framework of Mikhail Bakhtin (Baş, 2019). Thirdly, Derviş Erdal in his article "Cihan Aktaş'ın Hikayelerinde Ötekileştirilmiş Başörtülü Kadınlar" (The Otherized Women in The Stories of Cihan Aktaş) is a study based upon the storybooks of Cihan Aktaş examining the alienation of women in universities, in business life, in family and environment and on the street (Erdal, 2012, pp.573-594).

In addition, previously Derin Funda examined in her Ph.D. dissertation in 2010 (Derin, 2010) the political terminology such as nationalism, conservatism, Islamism and gender issues in the works of Islamist women writers such as Yıldız Ramazanoğlu, Cihan Aktaş, Sibel Eraslan, Fatma Karabıyık Barbarosoğlu and concluded that these women are educated writers problematizing religious identity, Islamism, Piety, Laicisim, etc. Then, in 2014 Emine Yılmaz (Yılmaz, 2014) compared Cihan Aktaş and Yıldız Ramazanoğlu's works and analyzed the gender roles and discourses in Turkish literature while Merve Gülcü (Gülcü, 2014) studied the short story books by Cihan Aktaş analyzing the female characters focusing issues such as their marital status, age, education, and career life. Finally, Fatma Züheyra Akagündüz's master thesis (Akagündüz, 2018) examines the protesting attitude of women in social life in the latest works of three Turkish Muslim female writers Cihan Aktaş, Fatma Barbarosoğlu and Yasemin Karahüseyin.

On the other hand, there are numerous researches and studies related to Leila Aboulela's works. The most known and cited work is Dr. Claire Chambers's study (Chambers, 2011), who interviewed British Muslim writers residing in Britain from various backgrounds. Leila Aboulela is one of the authors in her research, and it is possible to find answers related to Aboulela's books in her interviews. In this study, Chambers discusses the term "British Muslim Fiction" and accepts the restriction coming with this definition; however, she mentions also that the authors in her book received being defined as such and participated in this study. Leila Aboulela has also engaged in the short story book *The Things I Would Tell You British Muslim Women Write* with various other authors and is therefore also referred to as a British Muslim writer today (Mahfouz, 2017). However, defining Aboulela's works as "British Muslim Fiction" might be restrictive as the author's works are more than just British Muslim Fiction.

Previously, Nesrin Koç's master thesis (Koç, 2014) provides a significant analysis of British Muslim identities based on Leila Aboulela's novel *Minaret* and Nadeem Aslam's

novel *Maps for Lost Lovers*. Also, Mahmoud Abdel-Hamid Mahmoud Ahmad Khalifa's Ph.D. dissertation (Khalifa, 2011) analyzes the hybridity in the narratives of Leila Aboulela, Randa Abdel-Fattah, Mohja Kahf, and Rayda Jacobs as Muslim female writers writing back to the oppression of Western feminism. Moreover, there are numerous articles published related to Leila Aboulela's novels mainly on *Minaret* and *The Translator* (Steinitz, 2013; Mazloun, 2015; Zannoun, 2019; Edwin, 2013; Alfaki, 2015; 2012; Hasan, 2015; Steiner, 2008; Adwan & Abu Amrieh, 2013; Abu Amrieh, 2014).

All of these studies are valuable and show that the works of Leila Aboulela and Cihan Aktaş can be examined and evaluated from different aspects. Hence, these studies focus on one region through the storybooks or the novels. My participation covers the comparison of two fields, Turkey and Britain, introducing two productive contemporary Muslim female authors Leila Aboulela and Cihan Aktaş from different geographies writing in different languages. However, similarities and differences in their narratives provide more global insight to the problems of Muslim women today. Different from the previous studies, my focus is on the contemporary reconstruction of Muslim female characters deconstructing the negative secondary binary concept of "the oppressed Muslim women" and finding its own feminine expression in the works of Muslim women writers. Eventually, while previous studies generally focused on the female characters, I have also analyzed the portrayal of contemporary Muslim male characters written in Muslim women writing since this issue is not discussed enough in literary theories and can contribute to contemporary Muslim women studies.

CHAPTER II

CONTEMPORARY MUSLIM WOMEN WRITERS: CIHAN AKTAŞ AND LEILA ABOULELA

In this chapter, I will introduce and try to inform about two contemporary Muslim women writers: Cihan Aktaş and Leila Aboulela to put forth their prominent role in contemporary Turkish and British fiction and focus mainly on their role in constructing present Muslim characters. To begin with, Cihan Aktaş is a Turkish writer writing in Turkish, whereas Leila Aboulela is Sudanese by origin but lives in Britain and writes in English. Furthermore, both authors are female and Muslim, and therefore similarities can be studied in terms of writing back to the marginalization of Muslim women, however, these patterns differ at the same time since Leila Aboulela's concern is based mainly upon the alienation of British Muslim women in Britain whereas Cihan Aktaş problematizes and examines the marginalization of Muslim women case in Turkey primarily. As for this, while Cihan Aktaş is one of the significant Muslim female writers in Turkey writing in her home country in Turkish where the author works and lives, Leila Aboulela writes mainly about the minorities in Britain focusing on the British Muslims' everyday life problems and writes in English. Her novels and stories are mostly set in Scotland and Aberdeen, where the author resides.

Initially, I should mention that these comparisons are kept quite general to inform, and I am aware that it might prevent to show the richness of their writings. For instance, in Cihan Aktaş' works subjects such as architecture, urbanization, problems of the countryside, alienation of refugees, coups and their effects, Iranian cinema and songs, Azerbaijani culture and folk songs and many more can be found. Similarly, in Leila Aboulela, it is possible to see the everyday life problems of Muslims in Britain, British Islamophobia, racism, homesickness, homelessness, and missing the home country, integration and assimilation topics. Thereby, Aboulela's works contain criticism on current issues such as the growing Islamophobic attacks against Muslims after 9/11,

the looting of mosques, a continuous hijab debate and subsequently assaults on women wearing the hijab, Muslims being labeled as radicals or terrorists, etc. The West has shown Muslim women as non-integrated women who do not speak the language very well, that Islam or their husbands oppress them, and they are likely to join Isis as brides of terrorists. However, Leila Aboulela makes clear in her interviews that Muslims are different from these negative portrayals and have a simple and ordinary life like anyone else in society. In other words, they are not extremists or radicals or oppressed by religion. Her Muslim female characters find peace in spirituality, are educated, and self-developed; thus, self-rationalizing characters refusing to be lead by others. There are difficulties in every character's life, and the oppressive collective discourses vary depending on the situation and the person, and these women do not accept what they are being told to do and instead struggle to make their way. Significantly, these authors have a lot in common and are productive writers providing the chance to examine numerous samples of Muslim characters; mainly, Muslim women speaking about their everyday life problems, rejecting collective discourses telling their own stories instead of being told by others.

To start with and compare in general terms, Cihan Aktaş and Leila Aboulela were both born in the '60s. Leila Aboulela was born in Cairo and grew up in Khartoum while Cihan Aktaş was born in Erzincan but furthered her studies and works in Istanbul. They have written numerous acclaimed short stories and novels. However, both authors are not direct literature graduates; Leila Aboulela has majored in statistics while Cihan Aktaş has majored in architecture. Their productivity and works captured the attention of many readers and academicians because they speak about current issues and everyday life problems of Muslims.

Related to "giving an individual voice to their characters" both authors have experienced "displacement" (both authors have lived or continue to live in different countries/cities) allowing them to show various aspects related to Muslims in their

works. For instance, the Turkish author, Cihan Aktaş has lived in Azerbaijan, where she wrote her stories *Azizenin Son Günü* based on Azerbaijani culture and folk songs, she also lived in Iran for a long time and lectured Turkish language and Literature at Allameh Tabataba'i University and her novel *Sınıra Yakın* is based on Iranian culture and women. Similarly, Sudanese-British author Leila Aboulela worked as a research assistant in London and lives currently in Aberdeen and Dubai and her novel *Lyrics Alley* is set in Egypt and Sudan where the author was born and lived until she moved to Britain. This “placelessness” of both authors made it possible to problematize the norms, to question the self, to experience and create various types of Muslim characters and use different settings in their works.

Being mentioned and referred by many scholars and authors, Leila Aboulela and Cihan Aktaş have contributed prominently to contemporary fiction, especially on the reconstruction of modern Muslim female characters. Their works can be considered as writing back to the neo-oriental and anti-Islamic depictions but also as a significant criticism of the oppression of Muslim communities (Khalifa, 2011). For instance, they have problematized the right to have a public space for Muslim women criticizing verbal abuse or attacks on Muslim women stemming from British Islamophobia in Leila Aboulela and laicist Muslims in Cihan Aktaş’s works. On the other hand, their books are self-reflexive and contain a lot of self-criticism towards the oppressive and restrictive cultures in Islamic communities and Muslim patriarchy. In this sense, the depiction of Muslim women characters is portrayed as rational rather than emotional characters, and these characters question the marginalization of Muslims as well as the immaturities of Muslim male characters. Their works are outstanding because they involve casual everyday life problems of Muslims in the metropolis different from the idealistic, exotic, oriental and unreachable perfectionist depiction in previous and current works. In this way, their narratives pave the way to a more realistic and recognizable depiction of Muslims and problematize recent matters related to their books. They have been influential as Muslim women writers since they give their

characters an individual voice, create space in public for them, and allow the characters to speak rather than speaking for them. In other words, these authors are acknowledged as shedding light on issues of Muslim women and men today such as their everyday life problems and struggles, finding self-fulfillment in faith, the criticism of oppressive collective voices, the marginalization, and alienation of Muslim women and their individual journeys despite everything.

2.1 Cihan Aktaş and Turkish Literature

Cihan Aktaş was born in 1960 in Refahiye-Erzincan in Turkey and graduated from Beşikdüzü Teacher Highschool in (1978) and Istanbul DGSA Architecture Academy in (1982). The author worked as an architect, journalist, and lecturer. First of all, Aktaş is known for her numerous short storybooks and novels but also her research and thesis books on gender studies in Turkey. Her storybooks are rich in topics and cultures for instance; *Azizenin Son Günü (the last day of Azize)* (Aktaş, 2016) has an Azerbaijani setting, “Uzakta bir Şehrin Gecesi” in her book *Fotoğrafta Ayrı Duran* (Aktaş, 2018) is about refugees and the outcomes of the Syrian war, *Ağzı Var Dili Yok Şehrazat* (Aktaş, 2005) is set in a small town and depicts the stories of peasants and laboring teachers.

Her stories and novels are mainly set in Turkey, and there are rich portrayals of various Muslim women speaking about their everyday life problems, hardships, and struggles trying to find their individual voice despite the oppression of collective discourses. Scholars such as Kenan Çayır, Ahmet Sait Akçay, Elifhan Köse and Zehra Yılmaz examining contemporary Muslim fiction, often refer to Cihan Aktaş in their works as she has witnessed the change from salvation novels to self-reflexive novels in the '80s and '90s. It can be understood from their references that, Aktaş is believed to be one of the leading Muslim female authors in Turkish literature questioning salvation novels and reconstructing self-reflexive and self-critical fiction.

To be more explanatory, the salvation novels⁴ (Hidayet romanları) (Çayır, 2016, p.155) are opposed by Cihan Aktaş due to the unrealistic and far too idealistic narratives preventing Muslim authors and readers from problematizing current, actual and everyday life struggles of Muslims (Akçay, 2012, p.23). In addition, the characters in these novels are flawless or stereotypical (ideal heroes or fallen angels), there is a collective oppressing voice (We) instead of individual experiences (I) dominating the plot, and the narration is decorated with suppressive clichés. Owing to this, Ahmet Sait Akçay claims that these novels were dominated by patriarchal pleasures and oriental depictions of women and argues that they could be seen as one of the reasons for Muslims turning to worldly pleasures instead of carrying religious concerns today (Akçay, 2012, p.65).

Consequently, these novels restricted Muslim women participation in public spaces and promoted to stay home and related to this Cihan Aktaş tells in an interview with Suzan Nur Başarslan that she has always admired Halide Edip's Kaya and Rabia character more than Şule Yüksel's Feyza character because Aktaş prefers Kaya who transforms public sphere according to her ideals rather than Feyza in salvation novels idealizing the return to home (Başarslan, 2012). From this sample and many other expressions of the author, it can be stated that Cihan Aktaş prefers to write against the marginalized and alienated Muslim women characters in salvation novels through reconstructing simple, casual, realistic, empowered Muslim female characters speaking their current issues.

2.2 Writing Back and Reconstructing Muslim Women in Turkey

Not only in fiction but also in non-fiction is Cihan Aktaş, a well-known writer. The author has numerous research and thesis books problematizing gender issues in

⁴ Kenan Çayır in his book *Islamic Literature in Contemporary Turkey From Epic to Novel* (2007): The salvation novels of the 1980s were narratives in which relations between an Islamic and secularized order were negotiated, an Islamic counterculture was imagined, and youths were proposed as the ideal Muslim self, necessitating their formation within a collective identity. The more self-reflexive and self-critical novels of the 1990s, on the other hand, interrogated these collective Islamic ideals as they reconstructed Islamic identity in the changing relational context of the period. pg. 155

Turkey, focusing on the case of Muslim women. Cihan Aktaş states that writers firstly reflect the period they live in and secondly they reflect fundamental human issues in their works. As a Muslim female writer with a scarf in Turkey, it was not easy to speak for Muslim women, and Aktaş expresses with sadness that she has spent at least ten years to get the right to write as a Muslim woman writer in Turkey. The author explains in her research book *İktidar Parantezi, Kadın, dil, kimlik (Governmental brackets, woman, language, identity)* (Aktaş, 2011) the reasons for writing thesis books despite her love and passion for literature and fiction. She felt the need to speak for the provincial Muslim female students coming from a low-income family waiting in front of the gates of the universities to find a gap to enter inside with their headscarves on a snowy and cold day. In this work, the author was urged to question and examine the definition of “hijab”, its relevance between the government and fashion and the social lives of the students wearing a scarf (Aktaş, 2011, p.17).

Sadly, the 28 February period has affected Muslims in Turkey and is defined as a “nirengi noktası” (a triangulation point) by the author and Cihan Aktaş urges in various platforms to speak about and for the victims being silenced, banned, marginalized and traumatized as she believes it is not expressed and written sufficiently (Aktaş, February 2010) (Aktaş, February 2016). For instance, in her article “Ormana Atılan Kızlar” (Girls Thrown into the Forest) posted online in 2018, Cihan Aktaş brings back the horror of the 28 February period in Turkey to the minds (Aktaş, March 2018). Meeting documentarian Fatma Aydın, they speak about a documentary named “Şubattan Sonra” (After February) broadcasted on TRT in 2015 and Aydın informs Aktaş about the 20 girls who were not allowed to enter the schools with their headscarves and were gathered by the police in front of the school and left behind into the Belgrad forest one by one approximately at a distance of 5km from each other as a punishment. Consequently, Aktaş explains that she had never heard this story, and there must be many other untold and unheard stories. After speaking with Aydın, the author finds the documentary and reaches Ilknur Daşdemir, one of the victims, and asks her whether

she had not told anyone about this issue for 22 years and if she had not seen anyone during her run in the forest for 6-7 hours. Subsequently, Cihan Aktaş wrote the tale referring to Ilknur's experiences in the forest called "Büyüsü Eksik Bir Orman Masalı"⁵ (A Forest Tale Missing Its Magic) in Sevda Dursun's book (Dursun, 2018). Thus, Muslim women writers like Cihan Aktaş traumatized and prepossessed problematize and still refer to 28 February as a "triangular point", "a benchmark" to understand how the Muslim women were oppressed, banned and silenced in Turkey with the reason to "take control" over "fundamentalist Islam". Significantly, Aktaş refers often in her writings to 28 February since she believes it has not been told adequately enough and the traumas still have an effect on the victims and create fear for Muslim women today. It is noteworthy that this period changed the author's life as a Muslim woman since Muslim women were not just seen as inferior but also as a threat or traitor. Moreover, Aktaş states that 28 February was only the outcome of previous anti-Islamic discourses, and if these discourses remain, the marginalization of Muslim women will continue in Turkey.

On the other hand, some Islamic circles were suppressing female authors as well, and therefore, it became almost impossible to write or to be active for many Muslim women. Related to this, Cihan Aktaş states that a "head-scarfed writer" was expected by these Muslim circles not to write "personal" stories since it would reveal privacy and private life; therefore, the story of a Muslim female writer could only be far from realism. As a reaction to all these, Cihan Aktaş attempted in her writings to ignore all these "collective voices" refusing to accept any definition by others. Her aim was to sound stronger than any other voice defining her identity, and subsequently, she wrote numerous sociological research and examination books about Muslim women who need a view (Başarslan, 2012). Therefore, the author is described as a leading female

⁵ Dursun, S. (2018). *Şubat Tutulması*. İstanbul: Vadi Yayinlari (many Turkish authors like Yıldız Ramazanoğlu, Sibel Eraslan, İsmail Kılıçaslan, Selvigül Kandoğmuş Şahin, Gülçin Durman, Gülcan Tezcan, Nurcan Toprak, Beyza Karakaya, Güzide Ertürk, Güven Adıgüzel, Arzu Kadumi, İbrahim Varelcı, Oğuzhan Kanat, Sevda Dursun, Kübra Güran Yiğitbaşı, Zeynep Zelan ve Saliha Sultan have participated to crack open and reveal the silenced and unrecognized stories of the 28 February victims)

author and intellectual in Turkey referred and mentioned in plenty of researches about Muslims in Turkey since the '80s and prefers to write without having any connection directly to any group or political party. As a Muslim female author, she has witnessed the marginalization and alienation of Muslim women through the laicistic policy in Turkey and has been forced to write back non-fiction as well as fiction to problematize religious identity, feminism and fashion and subsequently; she attempted to reconstruct the negatively portrayed Muslim women as rational, liberal and responsible⁶ (Gürel, 2018, p.191).

Having experienced almost all coups in Turkey, Cihan Aktaş shared with Nilgün Bıyıklı in an interview that she could not take her master's degree due to the headscarf ban on 12 September (Bıyıklı, October 2018). Her research book *Bacıdan Bayan'a* (From Sister to Madam) (Aktaş, 2001) was banned and collected in 2002; however, it was canceled afterward. Although the author is mostly known for questioning the marginalization of Muslim women, Cihan Aktaş problematizes all sorts of misused power of entities in her works. Most of the author's research books written in the '80s and '90s are often referred in academic studies, and some of them are: *Sömürü Odağında Kadın* (Woman In The Focus Of Exploitation) (Aktaş, 1985), *Sistem İçinde Kadın* (Woman In The System) (Aktaş, 1988), *Modernizmin Evsizliği ve Ailenin Gerekliliği* (Homelessness Of Modernism And The Necessity Of Family) (Aktaş, 1992), *Bacı'dan Bayan'a/İslamcı Kadınların Kamusal Alan Tecrübesi* (From "Sister" To "Madam"/ The Experience Of Islamist Women In Public Spaces) (Aktaş, 2001), *İktidar Parantezi: Kadın Dil Kimlik* (Governmental Brackets: Woman, Language And Identity) (Aktaş, 2011).

Related to her works, Umut Azak, assistant professor at Okan University, mentions the importance of criticism from Muslim women writers like Cihan Aktaş as they have a crucial role in investigating general women's rights in Islamic and Secular

⁶ Perin Gürel in her research "Good Headscarf, Bad Headscarf: Drawing the (Hair)lines of Turkishness" mentions Cihan Aktaş examining the political meanings ascribed to the headscarf of Muslim women in Turkey in *Turbanın Yeniden İcadı* in 2006 (the reinvention of the headscarf) and describes the "good headscarf" and "bad headscarf" samples in Turkey (191).

environments⁷ (Azak, 2013). Also, Yeşim Arat, professor at Boğaziçi University Department of Political Science and International Relations having numerous works on women and their participation in politics and Islam in Turkey, refers to Cihan Aktaş and explains that the feminist movement was unable to defend the rights of Muslim women, and Islamist writers such as Cihan Aktaş had to fight for the rights of Muslim women to wear their scarf in public spaces, to study and work and practice their religion liberally⁸ (Arat, 2005). In his book *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey* M. Hakan Yavuz, mentions Cihan Aktaş as “a leading Islamic woman writer” examining issues about Muslim women in Turkey and explains that he realized from his pro-Islamic students that the headscarf is a part of Muslim women’s identity to “carve-out” new spaces in private and public, secular and religious spheres (Yavuz, 2005, p.99). Thus, in many kinds of research on Muslim writings in Turkey, Cihan Aktaş is mentioned or referred to as she is not only a fiction writer but also a leading researcher in the case of Muslim women in Turkey⁹.

Cihan Aktaş is often questioned about feminism, and in her interview, she refers to Jacques Lacan and the matter of gaze. Many have defined and try to identify women, but praising or belittling alienates women further, she claims. The author believes that women should define and come up individually for their identity. Otherwise, she will be

⁷ Umut Azak: “Beyond the Headscarf: Secularism and Freedom of Religion in Turkey”: In other words, women, veiled or unveiled, are challenged by the same patriarchal hegemony, denying them treatment as equal individuals in any space, conservative/ Islamic or secular. Hence the critique of patriarchal social norms from within Islamic groups by women activists and writers such as Fatma Barbarosoğlu, Cihan Aktaş, and Sibel Erarslan –often referred to as “Islamic feminists”– is crucial for problematizing gender relations which restrict women’s capacities in both Islamic and secular environments. (98)

⁸ Yeşim Arat in “Women’s Challenge to citizenship in Turkey” However, first the parameters within which Islam was circumscribed had to be enlarged. Islamist women, those who used Islam as an explicit political ideology to define themselves, had to wage a fight to have themselves accepted publicly rather than merely privately. The most visible and politically critical battle was fought in defence of women's right to cover their heads in any public space, as they claimed Islam dictates (111)

⁹ For instance: *Sömürü Odağında Kadın* (1985), *Kadının Serüveni* (1986) and *Sistem İçinde Kadın* (1988) written in the 80’s by Cihan Aktaş involve topics such as the exploitation of women, the birth and growth of feminism in the west, feminism and eastern women, secularism and conservative women and their common problems, the oppression of collective voices and the silenced Muslim women in secular as well as Islamic public spheres.

specified and used by others. Accordingly, Gül Aldıkaçtı Marshall describes Cihan Aktaş as an Islamist/activist/scholar who believes feminism is a western concept and not applicable to Islam (Marshall, 2008). Although writers like Cihan Aktaş problematize or criticize Muslim or secular men, they think feminism is a limited concept and men and women can find their solutions through an individual struggle to learn Islam. This issue will be further discussed in chapter 3 as I have understood that both Cihan Aktaş and Leila Aboulela have their particular understanding of feminism because the repeating patterns in their works prove that they aimed to write back for the rights of Muslim women and it would be unrealistic to state that there is no feminism in their writings at all. Both authors confessed as well in their interviews saying that their feminism is an idiocratic or an individual one, and this can be seen clearly in their works.

In other words, Cihan Aktaş is a leading Turkish writer and researcher who has used her pen also to come up for the marginalization of Muslim women in Turkey since she felt the need to speak for the silenced women and their traumas before and after 28 February. The author criticizes all restricting voices, whether it is political, cultural, or patriarchal. In addition, Cihan Aktaş gives the message to Muslim women that they can represent their Muslim identity and have their private space in public at the same time (Erdal, 2012). As sociologist Nilüfer Göle concludes, writers like Aktaş problematizing and questioning Muslim communities and circles are essential as they challenge Muslim and secular patriarchy at the same time and this might change gender issues in Turkey in general (Göle, 1996).

2.3 Leila Aboulela and British Literature

Leila Aboulela is a Sudanese writer who was born in Cairo and lived a long time in Sudan. Coming from two colonized countries, Leila Aboulela observed and experienced her life in Britain productively. The author resides currently in Aberdeen and Dubai. Leila Aboulela has received positive criticism and is different for questioning multi-identities, immigration and Muslim cultures and their everyday life problems in her

works. Her stories and novels are remarkable and exceptional since her characters are not portrayed as oppressed, passive or idealized and flawless characters like previous works and most significantly; these characters try to reason with Islam in contemporary Europe, challenging Muslims and immigrants far more in the last ten years¹⁰. Likewise, Porochista Khakpour defines Leila Aboulela's works as "holding a mirror" to the world and considers her work as literary realism challenging the bicultural lives of Muslim Europeans individually by constructing different, critical, flawless characters trying to find a home in their multiple cultured and clashing complicated lives (Khakpour, March 2019). Similarly, Lisa Clifford claims that Leila Aboulela is concerned about Muslims living in parts with numerous identities in two worlds.

It is possible to see culture clashes in relationships and characters finding peace in Islam and mosques uniting the cultures and differences, solving problems between the sexes in Aboulela's works. The author pays importance to the actual portrayal of Muslims different from the rising anti-Islamic or Islamophobic representations of Muslim in the West and according to Clifford,

Aboulela says that portraying ordinary, everyday faith is important to her, as it's a subject not often dealt with by fiction writers. "You get books about very fundamentalist characters or you get characters who are atheists and have rejected religion," she said. "In reality there are a lot of people in the middle. But in fiction, there is a lack of representation of the average person of faith". (Clifford, 2017)

Thus, speaking about the simple and everyday life problems of British Muslims makes her works unique since her readers can recognize and sympathize with the plot and the characters and see that Muslims are not the demons in the society. Readers are exposed to realistic, down to earth characters and can sympathize with them easily. Dr. Claire Chambers, author and lecturer in the department of English and Related Literature at the University of York, has written two books about British Muslim fiction

¹⁰Official website of Leila Aboulela: <http://www.leila-aboulela.com/>

(Chambers, 2011; Chambers, 2018) and in her book *British Muslim Fictions: Interviews with Contemporary Writers* (Chambers, 2011) Chambers has interviewed Leila Aboulela as one of the leading British Muslim writers. Leila Aboulela replies to Chambers about her religiously-based narrating style on her novel *Lyrics Alley* with the following words,

I feel I have gone deeper in writing about Islam - and about the meaning of faith - than in my other novels. By moving the setting of this novel to Sudan and choosing an all-Muslim cast, I naturally lost the juxtaposition of East/West and the tension between Muslim/ non-Muslim that was prominent in *Minaret* and even more so in *The Translator*. The situation in *Lyrics Alley* reflects Muslim cultures in a Muslim setting and I wanted to present characters with different shades of religious devotion. It was also important to show how the traditions that affected women adversely (such as polygamy and segregation) were not tied to religious observance. (Aboulela, 2011, p.103)

It can be understood from the author's reply that, Aboulela differentiates culture and Islam in her works and does not see religion as oppression but cultural discourses as a force on women. Also, Leila Aboulela is not afraid to use religiously inflected narration insomuch that she deliberately aims to portray the colorful personalities of Muslim characters, diverse Muslim cultures and norms, and values, the difference between Islam and culture, etc. Therefore, the author does not mind to be referred to as writing "halal" fiction because she has received positive reactions from her Muslim readers.

Related to the above, it can be stated that Muslim writers are categorized or marketed somehow, although they do not have such a preference. In this case, Leila Aboulela deals with this reality in a warm-hearted manner and accepts the truths in it.

Similar to Cihan Aktaş, Leila Aboulela lived in her youth in secular and left-wing Sudan where she admired people living their faith, girls wearing a scarf but she could not express her feelings since her friends would talk her out of it. The author explains that she could only decide freely to wear the hijab in Britain as she felt free to express her religion as the veil had no specific connotation in Britain. In her novel, *Minaret*, Najwa reflects this issue as she comes from a highly secular environment in Sudan and can

find peace in religion only when she moves to Britain and abandons the oppressive and marginalizing secular people around her like her Sudanese leftist boyfriend. The author claims that her Sudanese secular readers still find the term “halal fiction” or “Muslim fiction” debatable and disturbing. This attitude is not different from secular readers in Turkey, but both authors enjoy writing fiction based on Islam and Muslim cultures ignoring the categorizations by others.

One of the issues essential to be addressed is Leila Aboulela’s interpretation of the Sharia law in Islam. Aboulela shares the opinion that the sharia belongs to the self or the individual rather than belonging to a group or culture, and this understanding makes her writings noteworthy in contemporary British fiction. Leila Aboulela explains her views about the Sharia law in her interview with Chambers as,

This point is very important in all of my writing: Islam isn't just part of the culture in my fiction; it's not a social norm or something like that, but has to do with the individual and their faith, beliefs, and aspirations. This has been central to my writing, and maybe this is what makes my writing different from that of other writers, who see the *sharia* solely as part of society and part of culture, rather than belonging to the individual herself. It's highlighted in my work, because my characters are largely based in Britain, which is not a Muslim country, and yet they as individuals want to practise Islam. (Chambers, 2011, p.111)

This issue will be one of the patterns repeated in her works and which I will further discuss in chapter 3. Seeing the Sharia as a part of the individual will empower the construction of Muslim female characters in her works and also help to deconstruct and overcome the marginalization of the collective discourses.

2.4 Writing Back and Reconstructing Muslim Women in Britain

“Terrorism”, “Islamophobia” and “Radicalism” are phenomenal concepts in the Western discourses, especially after 9/11 and affect the lives of Muslims living in the Western countries extremely. Leila Aboulela, in her column, called “Why must Britain’s

young Muslims live with this unjust suspicion?” refers to this topic with the following words,

Muslims are required to be on alert, distancing themselves from extremism, apologising for the latest atrocity, explaining, defending, dodging, avoiding confrontations or even discussions. Before even being exposed to radicalisation, young Muslims are talked down to and told off. They are shoved under the microscope. Whatever the news item, whatever the issue, be it cultural practice or immigration rules, regardless of how religious they are or how much they practise, by simply being Muslim the youth are made to feel that they are on the wrong side. (Aboulela, July 2015)

“Being on the wrong side” as Aboulela defines above also led to new measurements, programs and regulations to prevent risks of extremism and radicalization. Aboulela in her novels like in *The Kindness of Enemies* chases the possible errors of the anti-terror legislation in order to show the disruptions and failures of these regulations and states that,

In 2011, an article in the Guardian reported that under new anti-terror legislations, university staff would be expected to inform on Muslim students vulnerable to radicalisation. This immediately fired my imagination. Some university staff are Muslim. What if one of them, eager to fit in, eager to distance themselves from being Muslim, sets out to inform on those of her students who were “at risk”? (Aboulela, July 2015)

As it can be understood, Leila Aboulela warns and sheds light upon a significant point resulting from the creation of a definition called “terrorism”. Lisa Stampnitzky in her book called *Disciplining Terror: How Experts Invented “Terrorism”* examines the experts who created the definition “terrorism” from “political violence” and started “a war against terrorism” in their works and Stampnitzky shows not only how socially constructed the term “terrorism” is but also the primary role of experts creating “terrorism” (Lisa, 2013). In this sense, it is possible to analyse and follow how “terrorism” is created and recreated by “experts”, partially the actors and the network

through Leila Aboulela's *The Kindness of Enemies*, similar to Stampnitzky's work with the aim to question and understand the process of creation through her novel, the disruptions and inaccuracy of measurement of the "experts" and consequently leading to the marginalization and alienation of Muslim students and non-Muslim students in Britain.

Furthermore, in the book *The Things I Would Tell You –British Muslim Women Write* edited by Sabrina Mahfouz, twenty-two British Muslim women writers; Fadia Faqir, Amina Jama, Chimene Suleyman, Aliyah Hasinah Holder, Kamila Shamsie, Imtiaz Dharker, Triska Hamid, Nafeesa Hamid, Ahdaf Soueif, Seema Begum, Leila Aboulela, Shazea Quraishi, Shaista Aziz, Miss L, Aisha Mirza, Hibaq Osman, Azra Tabassum, Selma Dabbagh, Asma Elbadawi, Samira Shackle, Sabrina Mahfouz and Hanan al-Shaykh have written stories in order to show the full range and richness of British Muslims in Britain and to challenge the negative portrayal of Muslim women after 9/11 in the West through their writings (Mahfouz, 2017, p. 10). Sabrina Mahfouz introducing the authors and the aim of the book states that writings can defeat the negative stereotypes, positive representation can empower greatly and overpower the dominant narratives spreading misrepresentation disempowering Muslims (Mahfouz, 2017, p. 12). Leila Aboulela's participation in writing back to the dominant narratives and defining herself as a British Muslim is remarkable as the author often refers to the unfair statements and regulations by the British authorities, the hypocrisy in academia when it comes to Islam, how easy people can be labeled as terrorists etc. in her works.

Furthermore, Leila Aboulela's works are defined as deconstructive and reconstructive works writing back to the colonized image of Muslim women. Accordingly, Muhammad Mahmudul Hasan teaching English and postcolonial literature at International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) and writing about feminism and Islam explains that in Neo-Oriental discourse Muslim women have received "fetishized" attention but the voices of Muslim women have been silenced in these narratives. Therefore, it is significant to

see fiction from authors like Leila Aboulela where Muslim women strive to speak for their identities in Britain, in London, in Aberdeen in other words in European cities and public spaces. As Hasan describes, these works speak for the Muslim women since they represent the contemporary Muslim women characters prioritizing and negotiating their faith and identity in the metropolis instead of being described by orientalist as exotic, mysterious, oppressed, hidden, silenced, unknown, etc. (Hasan, 2015). Furthermore, Sherine Fouad Mazloum claims that Muslim women are triply displaced because they are women, oriental, and Muslim.

The struggle of these women trying to find a place in a society where they are marginalized is resolved in Leila Aboulela's works through faith. Muslim women characters find a home in British mosques, through translating their identity as a Muslim woman living in Britain to English. Aboulela refers to Islamophobic violence towards Muslim women in her novels because women are easier attacked due to their hijab. Eventually, Leila Aboulela's works can be seen as translating her Muslim-women-migrant identity to English through fiction for Western readers since the author focuses on how concepts and cultures are explained or mistranslated in her works. Aboulela uses in the *Translator*, her first novel in 1999 the relationship of Rae and Sammar to question whether it is possible to translate Arabic to English and Islam to the West¹¹. In other words, Leila Aboulela writes about the experiences of British Muslim women with Islam in the center of her works and tells in her interview that she started to write for the Western audience and in return also became the voice of Muslims living in the

¹¹ Rachael Gilmour in "Living between languages: the politics of translation in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* and Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*". "Nevertheless, British Islamophobia is a constant if unemphasized presence, here as elsewhere in Aboulela's writing. Out walking with Tamer, the devout Muslim son of her employer, Najwa senses "the slight unease he inspires in the people around us. I turn and look at him through their eyes. Tall, young, Arab-looking, dark eyes and the beard, just like a terrorist" (100). An effective translator, she is able to "look at him through their eyes"; but of course, the same is not true in reverse, and Najwa's *hijab* is similarly mistranslated as the signifier of a radical, political Islam. When a group of drunken youths on a bus throw a can of Tizer at her, calling her "Muslim scum", Najwa's instant recognition of the taste of that beverage – in all its almost absurdly anachronistic Britishness – demonstrates her insider's knowledge of the society which marginalizes her (80-1) (7)

West (Gilmour, 2012, p.113). This is because her stories are written through the eyes of Muslim women (Cosslett, 2019).

Briefly, Leila Aboulela is one of the leading British female authors creating Muslim characters that are not afraid of defining their identity through religion and try to find self-fulfillment in life. Her works differ obviously from the dominant narratives, and previous works where Muslims are shown as radicals or terrorists and Muslim women are seen as backward and oppressed. In this sense, Aboulela writes back against the weakly portrayed Muslim women's image and reconstructs independent, familiar, realistic Muslim female characters, struggling to find their place and rights in public. Within their individual journeys, these characters problematize current issues such as Islamophobia and the illiberalities in Muslim communities¹² (Mazloun, 2015).

¹² Sherine Fouad Mazloun in her article “‘Displaced’ Muslim Women in Monica Ali’s Brick Lane and Leila Aboulela’s Minaret” analyzing Muslim women characters in British Muslim works by Monica Ali and Leila.

CHAPTER III

WOMEN WRITING & MUSLIM FEMALE CHARACTERS IN LEILA ABOULELA AND CIHAN AKTAŞ

3.1 The Importance of Muslim Women Writing Women

Women's writing has been downtrodden for decades since women have been overlooked in literature as well as in life. Women have been averted from education, work, culture, and public spaces and still struggle to find their rights as a human in a male-dominated world. While some women accepted this situation, others have struggled at the expense of their lives to change. The male-dominated society has neglected the power of women and has been anxious and skeptical about her productivity and creativity. However, women writers managed to show their skills in writing, and today, it is possible to see great literary works by female writers.

Feminist literary criticism considers Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (Woolf, 2012) as an iconic work since Woolf brings forward and excoriates women's hardship and deprivation of educational, social and financial life during history. Through the female characters Mary and Judith, Woolf argues that women have been seen as inferior subjects and writers by men in history and Woolf imagines how it would be if William Shakespeare had a sister called Judith Shakespeare; equally talented and creative. However, Judith Shakespeare must have been hampered and would most probably go insane because she would be deprived of showing her brilliant skills to others. People would expect her to get married, to do the housekeeping and to take care of the child instead of supporting her to improve her talents through education and giving her a chance to show her abilities. Woolf's criticism is necessary to understand the history of women's writing process and provides hope to see women's creativity and intelligence overlooked for decades.

Secondly, feminist literary criticism regards “The Laugh of the Medusa” (Cixous, Cohen & Cohen, 1976) by feminist philosopher Helen Cixous as a critical feminist essay to examine the significance of women writing women. Similar to Woolf, Cixous declares previous male-dominated texts as “phallus centric”, glorifying their male bodies and their works while depicting women and women writers as inferior. Many women writers also adopted this patriarchal language, and therefore, Western history is dominated with phallus centric texts. Being aware that women have been portrayed inferior by men and that women have identified themselves with these texts for decades; Cixous manifests that women writing will give women their body back, put her back in the text, into the world and the history if she finds her own discourse and language (Cixous, Cohen & Cohen, 1976, p.875). Another significant issue criticized harshly by Cixous is the male-dominated economy in literature, yet Cixous still urges women to write back,

Write, let no one hold you back, let nothing stop you: not man; not the imbecilic capitalist machinery, in which publishing houses are the crafty, obsequious relayers of imperatives handed down by an economy that works against us and off our backs; and not yourself. Smug-faced readers, managing editors, and big bosses don't like the true texts of women-female-sexed texts. That kind scares them. (Cixous, Cohen & Cohen, 1976, p.877)

Thus in order to get the last laugh like Medusa, women should reconstruct a feminine mode of writing and write themselves.

Woolf and Cixous encouragement to support women’s writing and finding a language of one’s own should have been applied to Muslim female writings, however, post-feminist scholars like Lila Abu-Lughod claim that previous feminists have failed to support Muslim women to define herself and have supported male-dominated politics showing Muslim women as the “oppressed” and the one who “needs to be saved” (Abu-Lughod, 2015).

Being aware of the hypocrisy of previous feminist approaches, Saba Mahmood problematizes this issue comparing the different meanings of the Arabic concept “Taqwa” with the English concept “piety” showing how translating culture and defining it from the language of the other is incorrect and misleading (Mahmood, 2005, p.4). Furthermore, Mahmood explains that the associated practices of Islamic piety have been accepted as “the subordination of women” for years by the West and has been seen as “the ultimate truth” in traditional feminist scholarship (Mahmood, 2005).

One of the most visible samples to observe the difference of Islamic piety is the practice of the veil being open to interpretation. The veil is something touchable and seen, but it has many metaphors since what is meant with the veil? And which type of veil is discussed here? Is it the headscarf, the hijab, the burka, the niqaab, the chador, the khimar, the al-amira or any other named and shaped cloth? On the other hand, for some Secularist-Muslims, the veil is not a cloth that is worn on the head but a metaphor to preserve the behaviors. Therefore, it can be stated that there is not a single veil; the interpretations of women are plural and the reasons to wear or not differ individually. As there is no one type of woman, there is no one type of a veil. Thus, it is inadequate to state that women wear a veil either because they are subordinated or that they are resisting it.

Thus from Saba Mahmood’s fieldwork and research it is possible to follow the associated practices of Islamic piety depending on the individual interpretation of women and the performativity of the individual which cannot be understood seeing all women as a collective identity since the acceptance of a collective discourse outlaws any other truth and understanding of the subject. Saba Mahmood questions it in this way,

Yet, one may ask, is such an assumption valid? What is the history by which we have come to assume its truth? What kind of a political imagination would lead one to think in this manner? More importantly, if

we discard such an assumption, what other analytical tools might be available to ask a different set of questions about women's participation in the Islamist movement? (Mahmood, 2005, p.2)

Asking women within instead of assuming on their behalf in Egypt, Mahmood differentiated herself from others and focused on the power relations, the performativity and questioned the Western theory.

Saba Mahmood's study takes place in six neighborhood mosques, participated by female practitioners and teachers in Egypt. The fieldwork shows the stories of various Muslim women participating in mosques for different reasons such as dealing with their familial problems, educating themselves, searching for solutions in their everyday lives through this participation. As a public space for Muslims, mosques have been considered to belong to men in traditional Muslim circles. However, Mahmood shows how mosques have been transformed into public spaces where Muslim women participate actively in educative programs and events, and this could be seen as a revival. This study shows the empowerment of Muslim women different from the "oppressed women by Islam" concept of Western feminists.

Likewise, Cihan Aktaş and Leila Aboulela's female characters are active in public spaces and although they do not directly seek to change gender relations in order to have "equality", or aim to improve Islam as a theological system, they manage to follow their individual journeys within the Western or Islamic society through bridging the gap between their religious beliefs and their daily conducts in public spaces. For instance, in Leila Aboulela's novel *Minaret*, Muslim women often gather in London's mosques (Aboulela, 2015). They participate in Islamic teachings such as Tajweed, Sharia law, Islamic history, and discuss topics related to women and their everyday lives. Women with their babies are also welcome here and get the chance to learn and socialize with others (Aboulela, 2015, p.79). The main character, Najwa is a babysitter who can join the lessons with the child she looks after and feels equality when she prays next to the

wife of the Senegalese ambassador who gives her a ride and is happy that they share the feeling of praying together (Aboulela, 2015, p.188). Thus it can be understood that mosques, as a public place, can have different functions such as integration, emancipation, education, socialization, therapy, etc. for women (Aboulela, 2015, p.257).

Howbeit, feminists have gone to their fieldwork with an answer in their minds: Islam oppresses “Muslim women,” and they have depicted the Muslim women through an Oriental perspective ignoring the power relations behind their subjects. There might be Muslim women who are oppressed, but even the force behind their oppression can be different. Related to this, Lila Abu-Lughod states that many Muslim women she has lived with and met in the Middle East are taken aback when they hear that Westerners think Islam oppresses women. One of these women, Zaynab, tells Abu-Lughod that the government and the corrupted behaviors of authorities oppress women in Egypt and not Islam (Abu-Lughod, 2015, p.1). So instead of problematizing the actual forces and helping these women, or seeing the problems at home, some Western feminists still work with the male-dominated politics depicting Muslim women inferior, backward, as a radical or a terrorist ignoring and overlooking her power and intellectuality.

For instance, Cihan Aktaş’ research book *Kadının Serüveni* (Woman’s Adventure) was published in 1986 in Turkey and had covered many of the issues mentioned above in post-feminist studies long ago (Aktaş, 1986). It is worthwhile analyzing because Aktaş starts explaining the history of how women have been enslaved, oppressed and marginalized in male-dominated texts (12-13) and how Western feminism served as a tool generalizing and suppressing other women (Aktaş, 1986, p.36). Aktaş examines the historical, social, political, financial, cultural motivation of Western feminism and the outcomes for women in the West and Turkey profoundly. While discussing the historical and social definitions of women, Aktaş claims that the historical reasons behind the birth and growth of feminism was at first a Western problem and not

related to the Eastern culture at the first place. Later on, Eastern Muslim women were defined by the West and misidentified themselves according to the narratives of the Orientalists and the colonizer as inferior, backward, and oppressed (Aktaş, 1986, p.47). Subsequently, after criticizing the early feminists oppressing other women, Aktaş analyses the active voice and role of Muslim women in literature, politics, and war during the late Ottoman era referring to intellectually and culturally developed Muslim female authors overlooked by the Orientalists like Hıgah hanım, Fatma Makbule, Mihrunnisa, Fatma Aliye and Emine Semiye. It can be understood that Aktaş prefers to see an independent and individual voice of Muslim women and takes samples of the first Muslim women writers from the Ottoman era.

Differing from many Muslim women authors in the '80s, Aktaş is self-critical and questions the Ottoman patriarchy as well as the Western patriarchy because both stopped Muslim women from being active and creative in the society. According to her, the Ottoman patriarchy was led away from Islam, and the Western patriarchy gossiped the secrets of the harem orientalizing these women. Furthermore, Aktaş examines the Republican era and asserts that the “modern Turkish women” misunderstood and misinterpreted “the ideal Turkish woman” defined by Mustafa Kemal (Aktaş, 1986, p.166) since “the Modern Enlightened Turkish woman” of Mustafa Kemal was far different from the republican women who focused on their outer look, were distracted by “womanly” fashion instead of improving their intellectuality and understanding contemporary politics and ideologies.

As it can be understood from the topics mentioned above, Cihan Aktaş had already problematized in the late 80's also in the 90's how Western feminists applying their ideals on Turkish women and seeing them as a collective identity oppressed and colonized other women, in her case the Eastern Muslim women. Aktaş problematized this issue asking whether it is applicable to use a single understanding of Western feminism and its ideals on all Turkish women or any group. According to her, it was a

failure because all women are different, Turkish women misunderstood and misinterpreted Western feminism, and it was unable to problematize or solve problems like education and working rights and did not question or criticize capitalism and enslavement of women and significant issues like prostitution. Moreover, Western feminism did not bespoke women in Turkey but problems in the West, and when it bespoke Eastern women, they were seen as inferior, oppressed, and backward. Thus, Aktaş had deconstructed stereotypes, schematized women issues, the backward portrayal of Eastern Muslim women and the oppression of collective discourses in her research book before the works of Mahmood and Abu-Lughod long ago and this shows the authors' vision.

Currently, Muslim female writers deconstructing the negative portrayal of Muslim women are often referred and labeled as "feminist", "Islamic feminist" or "Islamist" and have become phenomenal discourses in Academia; however, this label alienates the authors and limits the richness of their works. For instance, the studies of Jasmine Zine (Zine, 2002) and Zahira Sarwar (Sarwar, 2014) on various current approaches of Islamic/Islamist/Muslim feminism show that the term "Islamic feminism" is disputable as it contains multiple approaches and they suggest multiple frameworks since the case of Muslim women cannot be understood with a single discourse. For instance, the case of Ayaan Hirsi Ali (also referred to as an Islamic feminist) and Amina Wadud is irreconcilable as the former "fights against the oppression of Islam" seeing it as a "threat", while the latter supports a feminine interpretation of Islamic text. According to Zine's study (Zine, 2002), Leila Aboulela and Cihan Aktaş are close to "faith-centered" Muslim feminism, and are native and local informants, however, I argue that these definitions remain limiting and disputable and therefore I do not categorize Cihan Aktaş or Leila Aboulela as a sort of feminist nevertheless claim that they have their individual understanding of feminism and construct their Muslim female characters accordingly.

In conclusion, the studies mentioned briefly above explain that there is not a single understanding of feminism and that feminist studies are not innocent as they have depicted Muslim women as “oppressed” and as if they need to be “saved”. Scholars such as Lila Abu-Lughod, Saba Mahmood and Cihan Aktaş have opposed to previous antagonistic feminist studies and have demoralized their theories. Consequently, it is possible to find the concepts of post-structural and post-feminist approaches in the works of Cihan Aktaş and Leila Aboulela.

In this chapter, I will examine and analyze the contemporary Muslim female characters reconstructed in Leila Aboulela and Cihan Aktaş’ works through the depiction of various female characters, their refusal to be seen as a collective identity, insisting on following their individuality and being self-critical. Both authors write back against the marginalization of women by multiple collective discourses and reconstruct empowered Muslim female characters. These characters are not empowered because they are “idealized,” but because they manage to speak confidently about their shortcomings and demand respect. Both authors suggest self-rationalization in religious matters as well as in every aspect of life; however, the diversities in their works enrich this study. For instance, the oppressive collective consciousness in Cihan Aktaş is based mainly upon the marginalization of Muslim women by the secular and conservative Muslim patriarchy in Turkey whereas Leila Aboulela’s collective discourses oppressing women are primarily based upon the alienation of Muslim women in Britain by the British or by some Muslim communities in Britain.

3.2 The individual Journey of Muslim Female Characters in Leila Aboulela

*“It is a lonely thing, he said. ‘You can’t avoid it’. ‘What?’
‘The spiritual path. Everyone is on his own in this.’”*

(The Translator, 195)

Leila Aboulela’s characters refuse to be portrayed as a collective identity common in Western discourses. Aboulela shows how they demand self-rationalization instead of

acting according to the rules forced upon others. The author differentiates collective and individual Sharia (Islamic law) in her works, as mentioned in chapter 2 and explains that this individual discourse separates her from other writings (Chambers, 2011). In this part I will analyze the Muslim female characters in Leila Aboulela's novels *Salma, Moni and Iman* from her latest book *Bird Summons*, Malak and Natasha in *The Kindness of Enemies*, Sammar from *The Translator* and Najwa in *Minaret*.

First of all, Leila Aboulela's current released novel *Bird Summons* (Aboulela, 2019) recounts the holiday or spiritual journey of three Muslim female characters, Salma, Moni, and Iman, traveling to the Scottish Highlands to visit the grave of the 19th-century Scottish Muslim convert Lady Evelyn Cobbold. Although these women are Scottish, Muslim, female, close friends, and traveling together, Aboulela shows that these three Muslim women are different from each other and cannot be considered as a collective identity. The author highlights how Muslim women living in Britain are different, let alone Muslim women in other parts of the world. Related to this, Donna Haraway deconstructing the myth of gender as a collective entity states that,

And who counts as 'us' in my own rhetoric? Which identities are available to ground such a potent political myth called 'us', and what could motivate enlistment in this collectivity? Painful fragmentation among feminists (not to mention among women) along every possible fault line has made the concept of woman elusive, an excuse for the matrix of women's dominations of each other. (Aboulela, 2019, p.296)

Like Haraway's cyborg "myth" (Haraway, 1991), Aboulela reconstructs multiple female characters refusing to be "meek" and be seen as a single identity. Haraway defines this as there is not one type of gender and not a collective identity of women. So, these three women travel together, but at the same time, they travel within their own spiritual journey having an "inward orientation" (Mahmood, 2005). Each woman carries her own backpack of fears, troubles, sins and when shared with the rest; they are at first not tolerated by the others, and there comes the point where these friends turn

almost into enemies because their experiences and interpretation of Islam clashes. Leila Aboulela depicts the awkward quarrel of three friends who criticize each other with ease and the absurdity of telling someone how to behave in such a way that while uttering they realize the hypocrisy in their own talks (Aboulela, 2019, p.186).

The first of them, Salma is admired by her friends as she is twenty years married to a Scottish convert, has four children, a job, a house and leads the Arabic Speaking Women's group in Britain (Aboulela, 2019, p.158), however, Salma is aware that she is not the ideal perfect Muslim women because she betrays everyone texting and flirting with her ex- Egyptian-fiancée, Amir, despite her conscience showing us her discomfort. We learn that Salma had to leave her ex-fiancée behind and married an English convert suggested by her uncle, but Salma feels alienated in this British family because her husband and children do not share her Egyptian culture and she misses her Egyptian identity in this British cultured marriage. Therefore, she texts Amir back because she does not feel home in Britain where she cannot practice her profession as a doctor due to the difficult exams in Britain. Thus, the oppression does not come from Islam or the men in her life but from the alienation of Muslim women in Britain, because she cannot perform her job as a doctor, and because she cannot find a home in this culture.

Secondly, Aboulela criticizes Muslim patriarchy through Moni's journey. She is the mother of a disabled son, Adam, and struggles alone for the improvement of her son in Britain. Her husband Murtada fails to establish a bond with his disabled son, feeling marginalized in Britain (Aboulela, 2019, p.25) and wants to "normalize" his marriage life with Moni; however, Moni refuses to go with him to Saudi Arabia because her son might even go to a special school which Moni thinks they will not be able to find in Saudi Arabia (Aboulela, 2019, p.24). Not only her husband but also women around her oppress Moni speaking the language of men as Cixous says in her essay. These patriarchal voices have taken over women around her such as her mother who threatens her stating that she should listen and move on otherwise her husband will

have another wife and not wait for her forever (Aboulela, 2019, p.155). Or her friends were telling her to fulfill her duty as a wife and not neglect her husband. However, Moni states that she feels better with a divorce and hears the repressive voices blaming her: “She could almost hear the collective condemnation from parents and friends. They would almost certainly take Murtada’s side. They would say that she had failed in her duty as a wife, that she had put her child first, and that was not proper, not natural” (Aboulela, 2019, p.156). Moni is bothered with these voices but refuses to follow her husband, who does not act rationally. Thus, despite the condemnations of the collective views and the criticism of her friends, Moni tells us that others cannot know what “normal” is for a woman and follows her own path dealing with her inner struggles during this spiritual journey (Aboulela, 2019, p.281).

The third woman in this journey is the beautiful Iman in her twenties “petted” by her family (Aboulela, 2019, p.19) married off at a young age due to the Syrian war, over-controlled by her previous three husbands being too possessive and her friends telling her how to behave and what to wear (Aboulela, 2019, p.13). Aboulela shows us through Iman why women should write their own stories because Iman could not control her body and life when she allowed others to tell her what to wear, how to behave or believe in God. She realizes that her husbands were not her “saviors” (Aboulela, 2019, p.33) taking care of her after her escape from the Syrian civil war and where she cannot return because her parents believe she is better off in Britain (Aboulela, 2019, p.68). Iman starts questioning her life and marriages and realizes that her relationship with men was maybe “religiously sanctioned prostitution” because she was passed from one husband to the other for her beauty, but none of them guaranteed a safe and secure life for her. Facing this ugly truth, Iman decides to depend on herself instead of leaning on someone else (Aboulela, 2019, p.73) and rejects special treatment from others, to lean on a man, to rely on her beauty or to copy what others do and stops wearing the hijab because she never made this choice independently (Aboulela, 2019, p.183). This unveiling is not a resistance shown to Islam

but to the culture not allowing her to be independent, to write her own story and Iman has literally no room to write this story. As a Muslim refugee woman, Iman learns that she needs to come up for her life alone. She wears the clothes she wants, prays better to God, improves her English, starts working, brings her mother from Syria and marries long years later (Aboulela, 2019, p.281).

Leila Aboulela writes how British Islamophobia oppresses Muslims through the “experts” in her novel *The Kindness of Enemies*. The novel starts with, Natasha an academician visiting Malak and her student Osama (Oz) as Natasha is working on Sheikh Shamil and “Jihad” because it is a phenomenal topic in academia and Malak and Oz are the descendants of Sheikh Shamil owning Sheikh Shamil’s sword. While Natasha visits them, two policemen come to arrest Oz for the likeness of the name “Osama” (Aboulela, 2019, p.16). First, two policemen show up and claim they have a “warrant” but do not give any explanation to get in the house, take the laptops and also the laptop of Natasha without listening to her reasons (Aboulela, 2019, p.74). In this part, Aboulela shows the intolerance towards Muslims through the police diving into the house without listening to any explanations grabbing personal stuff of people because Muslims are quickly labeled as radicals and extremists.

Likewise, these characters are seen as “terrorists” by the police just because of the likeness of a name and Natasha is found suspect just because she visited them. This event will change Natasha as a scholar and academician because Oz is one of her dear students, and she knows that he is not a “terrorist”. Natasha shows the absurdity of academicians working as “experts” (Stampnitzky, 2013) to submit reports against students whom they think can have a tendency for “radicalism” since how can one define another as such through asking questions like “do you have a girlfriend?”. Such incorrect evaluation is highly criticized today in post-structural studies showing how “experts” use their power to colonize and oppress others (Mitchell, 2012).

On the other hand, Leila Aboulela criticizes dominating Muslim patriarchy in Britain through the case of Malak; the mother of Oz (Aboulela, 2017). The Muslim community marginalizes Malak because she does not wear the hijab and is an actor. For them, Malak is not “a good Muslim woman” because she is different, a Sufi and does not fit into the “modern political Islamic understanding of this community” (Aboulela, 2017, p.207). Aboulela shows again why it is vital that women should write women because the male-dominated consciousness marginalizes Malak through her family, the British for being a Muslim and also by the Islamic community because she is a Sufi. Her son Oz was told harshly (he almost cried) to talk and convince his mother to quit her job by one of the invited speakers in community and Oz felt even more alienated. Despite all of these oppressive factors, Malak manages to save her son from being falsely accused and imprisoned, strengthens her bond with Allah in her individual journey and though not intended; Malak becomes a spiritual leader, a guide for the main character Natasha Hussain who chose to be guided by Malak despite British Islamophobia. Malak helped Natasha in her academic research about Imam Shamil, became the family Natasha was yearning for and invited her to Zikhr gatherings in London (Aboulela, 2017, p.314). Related to this, Natasha describes her thoughts about Malak in the last lines of the book as,

Sufism delves into the hidden truth behind the disguise. Malak the teacher is disguised as an actor. Natasha the student, acting the part of a teacher. I had come to her today needing to connect, wanting to spend time in her company. Perhaps it was time to acknowledge that what I was after was spiritual. She was ready to be a guide and I would fight my weaknesses in order to follow. (Aboulela, 2017, p.314)

Based upon Malak, it can be understood that Leila Aboulela constructed one of the most impressively empowered Muslim female characters who actually does not fit anywhere but manages to guide Natasha to Islam despite all the hardships.

It can be understood from the samples above that Leila Aboulela suggests women to take care of their sensitive and spiritual nature in defiance of any oppressive structure. It is possible to see this in her naïve feminine language depicting the simple and ordinary lives of her characters. In *Minaret*, Najwa is such a naïve woman telling us how it was wrong of her to lean on all men in her life who were immature themselves (Aboulela, 2015). Being utterly passive at the beginning, she comes to a point, refusing to let anyone harm her sensitive nature. Islam becomes the strength of Najwa because this is the only place where she is not marginalized, oppressed, harmed by people and where she can fulfill her obligations to God.

Similar to the women in Saba Mahmood's fieldwork, Najwa's spiritual instinct helps her to participate in the mosque and end her feeling of loneliness and despair in life. Eventually, she starts seeing Anwar's selfish desires, and she rejects Anwar's domination going instead to the mosque to educate herself. On the other hand, Anwar, colonized by the negative portrayal of dominant western discourses showing Islam as "backward" and not "modern" reacts with disgust to Najwa's choice telling her that she is not like "these people" (Muslims) and forces her to obey him with his words against Islam. He claims that she is "modern" (Aboulela, 2015, p.243), another misunderstood Western concept; yet Najwa gives up on him and turns into a strong character deciding independently what is better for her.

Muslims also use Western concepts to define the self or the other and this can be seen through the English concept "Modern" often in the works of Leila Aboulela. The author shows how powerful feminine mode of writing can be in return and explains the significance of sisterhood in Islam through the power relations of women. This can be seen in the performativity of Wafaa and Shahinaz who support and inspire Najwa, Wafaa being like a mother, a guide, a teacher a true friend who was first just a stranger, an unknown woman, who washed her mother's corpse and did the final ritual. She was the one who invited Najwa to the mosque, taught her how to wear a

scarf, and helped her to fulfill herself spiritually. Therefore, Wafaa represents women supporting other women to succeed in life without expecting anything in return.

On the other hand, Aboulela criticizes women who have defined themselves as “modern” and superior to the others in the society through Lamya and her mother Doctora Zeinab (Aboulela, 2015, p.116). Lamya looks down upon Najwa and does not appreciate her efforts whereas Najwa cooks, cleans and looks after Lamya’s daughter and is not just her Muslim sister but a veteran who helps her out every day. She oppresses her like the capitalist system, not valuing her efforts and treats her unequally. Najwa is just a “maid”, Lamya and Doctora Zeinab believe they can humiliate or abuse. When Najwa and Tamer’s relationship is revealed, Najwa is not given a chance to come up for herself; she is silenced harshly by Lamya and Doctora Zeinab seeing her as some bad woman who seduced their son for money, and they offer her money to end this relationship.

The author shows the absurdity of Doctora Zeinab quoting from the prophet’s life but at the same time refusing to use his life as a sample because she thinks that can only happen in those times. Doctora Zeinab complains about her son quoting from the prophet’s marriage that the prophet married his first wife Khadija, who was 15 years older than him, and she was also his boss. It is an awkward moment for Najwa because she is humiliated and refused because of the age difference by “her people” who pretend to be “modern Muslims” while she has the right in Islam to marry a younger man. Khadija could propose to Muhammad, who was her employee as it is common in Islamic culture for women to propose to men. However, how many women claiming to be a “feminist”, “liberal,” and “modern” today can propose to men? How many can marry a younger man going against this oppressive patriarchal culture stating men marrying older women as “marrying a woman almost as old as your mother”?

Related to all the above, the author shows the critical role of women translating their values to the others around them using her own language. In her novel *The Translator*, the female character Sammar translates the sorrow of a widow, a single mother, and her rejections of the collective voices in order to find her individual voice despite everything. It is possible to see the male-dominated language of men in Sudan adapted by women forcing Sammar to become the second wife of an older man since it is believed that widows could be easily misled and marrying them off is seen as the best solution. Sammar opposes to this patriarchal language and moves to Scotland. She works at the university as a translator with Rae, an agnostic Islamic scholar and translates not only Arabic but also Islamic interpretations to him. Through Sammar, Aboulela reconstructs a strong female character who is not translated but who translates language, religion, and her culture and encourages people around her to change and find their self-fulfillment individually. For instance, Sammar loves Rae despite the criticism of her friend Yasmin suggesting Sammar to go to Sudan and marry someone “normal” not Scottish (Aboulela, 2010, p.90). Despite all the criticism of her friends that Rae is not a Muslim, and this relationship is wrong, Sammar follows her own journey (Aboulela, 2010, p.113). In other words, Sammar shows that strong Muslim female characters should write, translate, question, and tell her own story and not let anyone else speak on her behalf.

To summarize, Muslim female characters in the works of Leila Aboulela are powerful women writing their own language although they are marginalized, discriminated, or attacked by dominant narratives who defined them as inferior subjects. They are also not the idealized and unrealistic women, “the angels in the house” in male-dominated language as they are active in public spaces and do not accept being seen as a passive collective identity. Although they are marginalized by these multiple dominant narratives like British Islamophobia, Orientalizing concepts, the suppression of male-dominated language in Western and Muslim patriarchy; these female characters decide what the best is for them and do not lean on others. Muslim women strive to find self-

fulfillment through Islam according to their own experiences and understanding and are not oppressed by Islam as the West shows. The author's reconstruction proves that there is hope when the individual struggle is not given up, and women can find their best expression through self-rationalization and following their own journeys.

3.3 The Individual Journey of Muslim Female Characters in Cihan Aktaş

If you want to become a good human and a servant of God, do not lean on a person or group but lean only on Allah. Even if you need guidance from someone, always remember the fudge factors, for yourself and for them because they are human and humans can err. Try to find the roots of your religion and touch its core. In this way, you will be able to know yourself and others better. (Aktaş, 1992, p.126)

This is the advice of Nesrin to the speaker criticizing people's faith around her in the short story book *Üç İhtilal Çocuğu*, (Three children of Revolution). The protagonist is in search of the "ideal Muslims" who are innocent, sinless, and perfect like angels; however, "Idealizing" is also dictating others. The author's suggestion is clear: Muslims should not live a life written by others but follow their individual journeys in life, especially in religious matters (Aktaş, 1992, p.122). In this part, I will examine the travels of Muslim female characters in Cihan Aktaş's literary works related to the subject. Şirin and Esmâ from *Şirin'in Düğünü*, Efsane, and Mina from *Sınıra Yakın*, Meral and Zeynep abla from *Seni Dinleyen Biri*, Hürriyet from *Üç İhtilal Çocuğu* and Süreyya in "Şemsiyenin Altında".

To understand the contemporary Muslim female characters constructed by the Turkish author Cihan Aktaş, it is necessary to mention the major changes in the lives of Muslim women starting with urbanism. Ayşe Saraçgil, in her book *Bukalemun Erkek* (Chameleon Man) investigates the modernization process profoundly starting from the Ottoman period to Modern Turkey portraying how the definition "patriarchal", both in scientific and daily language is far beyond the single concept "male-domination"; patriarchal is the critical concept shaping the perception of the world, the accumulation

of social experience throughout history, and the structures that determine the mechanisms of power (Saraçgil, 2000). Accordingly, Saraçgil explains the history of the Turkish Muslim movement starting from the 1970s as merging piety with modern urbanism (Saraçgil, 2000, p.400). Muslim women's veil allowed women to feel comfortable in public spaces since she could preserve her piety and benefit from the tools of modernism. "The veil" which is often and still misinterpreted by the West as "oppressing women", was used by Turkish Muslim women as a tool to enter universities, the business market and allowed women to re-define their modern identities.

However, the laicist ideology in Turkey existing in its binary concepts labeled people as laicist/conservative, intellectual/ignorant, modern/traditional and Muslim women's veil turned into a political subject. This binarism led to the 28 February coup in Turkey and Muslim women were banned from entering the universities, from working in governmental buildings with the same veil allowing them to socialize in the first place. Saraçgil, explains that Muslim women shattered the binarism of these laicist politics showing them as the second binary, inferior, backward, ignorant, etc. by using modern tools such as modern protesting techniques refusing to give up their rights to educate, work, socialize, etc. As a Muslim female writer witnessing this period, Cihan Aktaş reconstructed female characters compelling, self-rationalizing, and integrating Muslim women refusing to give up their rights to study, to take place in public spaces. Her latest works still refer to the traumas of the 28 February period as the author believes that Muslim women have been deprived of their human rights by the laicist as well as the Muslim patriarchy in Turkey and still carry the traumas of those days.

Accordingly, Cihan Aktaş' latest novel *Şirin'in Düşünü* (Aktaş, 2016a) gives voice to the silenced female character Şirin from Nizam-i Gencevi's folk story "Ferhad and Şirin". This work is already a deconstruction of an old folk story where the female character has no voice. Aktaş deconstructs the story by reconstructing the Turkish Modern

female character Şirin, who refuses to hide her identity by using tactics to get rid of her aunt's domination such as make-up to participate actively in public spaces and Şirin comes up for her headscarved friend Esmâ (Aktaş, 2016a, p.9). Esmâ depicts the modern Muslim woman of today still being otherized by her people who see her as a threat. Şirin's aunt and Şirin's lover Faruk falsely accuse Esmâ of not being a "sincere" Muslim, wearing the headscarf because she might be a "terrorist," or wants to create problems in the society and Şirin should stay away from this girl (Aktaş, 2016a, p.39). This dominant narrative also tells what pious women must do: "Besides if she wears a scarf, she should sit at home and marry a conservative man and a girl who wears a headscarf should not go out in public but sit at home". This statement reflects the Laicist discourse banning Muslim women from universities and the business market still remnant: "They are wearing a scarf and joining protests and then blaming people for not being allowed to study with a headscarf!" (Aktaş, 2016a, p.138).

Şirin dismantles this binarism, and despite the unreal story told by her aunt and Faruk, she prefers to listen to these women and befriends Esmâ who explains Şirin that she was unable to finish her studies but would continue to struggle against all forces (Aktaş, 2016a, p.139). According to Esmâ, Muslim women are mostly suppressed by the so-called "conservative Muslims" because they consider about the state of their business and ignore the problems of Muslim women (Aktaş, 2016a, p.138). Furthermore, being Kurdish makes Esmâ feel sad and alienated as well, especially when her friends sheepishly tell her, "Oh, you do not look like a Kurd" (Aktaş, 2016a, p.416). Despite all, Şirin and Esmâ represent the contemporary Muslim women in Turkey struggling with the binary constructed politics in Turkey; yet manage to follow their individual path. Şirin loves Esmâ for who she is and admires her courage to show her Muslim identity despite all-dominating narratives. Likewise, Esmâ appreciates Şirin's efforts to come up for the marginalized people in the society and her sincere friendship being aware that Şirin is surrounded by people who dislike her because she is a Kurdish Muslim activist.

Showing plural forms of male-dominated discourses, an unnamed Muslim woman character from the story “Teşekkürü Hakettiniz Bay Yargıç” (Well-done Mr. Judge), tells the reader that she is verbally abused and attacked by the furious looks of a stranger (Aktaş, 1992). This man who walks by speaks horrible seeing the unnamed female character wearing a veil and is disgusted. As a reaction, the veiled woman deciphers the oppressive binary discourses by questioning the behavior of this stranger who speaks without knowing her personally. Moreover, she deconstructs the various patriarchal discourses by telling how this culture regards her unsuccessful, although she is taking care of her husband and her child and how women are silenced by the male-dominated culture because patience is considered as an art woman should possess (Aktaş, 1992, p.25). Thereby, the patriarchal authorities taking the rights of veiled women allowed culturally constructed male-domination to oppress Muslim women since they got engaged to be the wife of an educated man with high status (Aktaş, 1992, p.27).

Despite the dominating patriarchal language, Aktaş’ characters speak and struggle to express their intellectuality. For instance, “Hürriyet” (freedom) nicknamed Fatima, is a woman in her thirties who can listen to her heart and think rationally (Aktaş, 1992, p.55), who can decide to wear the hijab or read the Qoran just because she loves the Fatima who is not very different than Hürriyet at all. This female character, Hürriyet, wants to problematize everyday life problems and also talk about politics; however, her husband believes that women who speak about such issues are “spoiled”, they should stick to the housework and comforting their husbands (Aktaş, 1992, p.63) but Hürriyet speaks and narrates this to us, and we can see that Aktaş’ Muslim female characters will problematize and speak all issues bothering them not accepting to be silenced.

Furthermore, a lawyer sitting in his office reading the paper about Muslim women wearing the veil says aloud: “These “karafatmalar” (cockroaches) should all be hanged at Beyazit square”, while looking at the female character wearing a scarf too. Muslim

women wearing the hijab were defined as “karafatma” by laicists signifying cockroaches whereas “KaraFatma” was the nickname Mustafa Kemal Atatürk gave to Fatma Seher Erden who fought bravely during the Turkish Independence war and was honored with a lieutenant medal in Turkish history¹³. This term was used for brave militant women (Kutluata, 2006) in the past; however, if “karafatma” signified brave Muslim women fighting wars, why did laicists use this term to mean cockroaches? It shows how laicists misunderstood or could be influenced by Orientalized concepts showing Muslim women inferior. Hearing the abusive lawyers’ statement, the nameless character complains to her boss, who is a conservative Muslim man. She hopes that he will come up for her; however, her boss defends this abusive man for being a good lawyer and doing his job well. The female character feels disappointed because she is marginalized double by her boss, who suggests her to be patient and mature instead of acting like a feminist. According to Muslim patriarchy, Muslim women should stay home and take care of the children instead of trying to act like a man working within public with other men (Aktaş, 1992, p.115). Instead of supporting Muslim women, Muslim patriarchy preferred ignoring Muslim women’s marginalization, and many Muslim writers like Cihan Aktaş in Turkey feel betrayed by them as well. Nonetheless, these characters are unstoppable and follow their individual paths despite all the verbal abuses and oppressions.

Cihan Aktaş criticizes not only the laicist but also the dictating Muslim male patriarchy. In her research book, *Modernizmin Evsizliği ve Ailenin Gerekliliği* (Aktaş, 1992a) (The homelessness of modernism and the importance of family) Aktaş examines and discusses the falsehood of some “hadiths” (statements of the prophet) academically misinterpret or put forth in male-dominated text deliberately to ridicule and reduce the value of Muslim women. Some men believe that they have the right to keep their wives at home by not permitting her to go out; however, there is no rule in Islam that women

¹³ Kurtuluş Savaşı'nın kadın kahramanı Kara Fatma. (2018, July 2). Retrieved from <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/yasam/kurtulus-savasinin-kadin-kahramani-kara-fatma-373046.html>

can be imprisoned like captives at home (Aktaş, 1992a, p.53). According to her, this oppressive patriarchal culture roots from ignorance and not Islam. Women are free to study, learn, work, produce and be creative but in all these so-called religious books titled “women’s duties towards her husband” (Aktaş, 1992a, p.48) and the lack of books titles “men’s duties towards women” oppress women. Aktaş shows, thus why it is significant that Muslim women interpret Islam individually instead of relying on male-dominated texts or language.

The author is against girls being raised as if they will marry one day because what if she cannot? Or marries a man who does not deserve her? And a woman who is taught to do the chores and to cook only, how can she raise children competing in a developing and changing world? (Aktaş, 1992a, p.68). In this way, Aktaş makes clear that both genders have responsibilities in Islam, and women should not be seen as the only gender to be responsible for the family. In addition, Aktaş gives samples from the marriage of Fatima (the daughter of the prophet) and her husband Ali stating that they divided the shores and Ali helped Fatima because she got quickly tired and was busy educating women about Islam. Through Aktaş’s research book and statements, it can be understood that Muslim women write back to the male-dominated language also existing in religious interpretations of Islam and this would be unknown without female consciousness and awareness of the topic.

Related to the above mentioned male-dominated texts, the female character Hürriyet problematizes the collective identity constructed in the above mentioned male-centered religious books telling the reader how she felt estranged in some Muslim women gatherings because they do not care about her as an individual. These Muslim women care about your surname, if you are married, which university you have graduated from, how many children you have instead of you as a Muslim woman and the problems you have to go through just because you are a Muslim woman (Aktaş, 1992a, p.67). They use the same male-centered language and seem to be contended

with books telling them “how to be an ideal Muslim woman” without questioning how ideal Muslim men should be.

Male-centered language is mostly visible in rural culture and women who go to their hometowns or villages observe the cultural differences between towns and cities. In the story “Şemsiyenin Altında” (below the Umbrella) Aktaş defines the concept of “himaye” (safeguard, protection, patronage) signifying the oppression of women “petted” by men (Aktaş, 1996). Aktaş portrays here similar to Aboulela’s novel *Lyrics Alley* which takes place in Sudan and Egypt, how modernism in Istanbul and the traditionalism in the Eastern parts of Turkey create a clash inside her female characters. A young couple, Yusuf and Süreyya educated and living in Istanbul move to Yusuf’s hometown, and while getting closer to his hometown, Yusuf’s accent and behaviors already start to change. The independent Süreyya is expected to find “safety” under the umbrella of her father-in-law, but she refuses to be “under protection” or to change into someone she is not. Süreyya feels estranged as she is here just “the wife of Yusuf” for these people and her bedroom becomes the only space where she can be herself as these people tell her what to wear, what to eat, how to behave and force her to change into a traditional, obeying, meek daughter-in-law. Becoming one of them is almost impossible for Süreyya because she cannot just rip off her individuality and become a collective identity. Süreyya and Nabila from *Lyrics Alley* represent both the modern Muslim woman who is oppressed by the forces of cultural factors where women are just seen as the belonging of men and are expected to behave in a specific manner among women. Despite the hardship and indifference of Yusuf’s family, Süreyya is portrayed as an independent character, not accepting the disrespectful behaviors of cultural norms ignoring her as a person.

In *Sınıra Yakın*, the protagonist Efsun is traveling to Iran on a bus with many other female travelers who all carry their individual life stories in their backpacks (Aktaş, 2012). Thereof, we can see multiple journeys on a single trip. In other words, all these

characters perceive Islam and culture differently. Efsun might be the most marginalized among them because she is a “ghazi” (war veteran) whose arm is numb (Aktaş, 2012, p.34). She is oppressed by the male-centered discourse in society; however, Efsun’s awareness makes it possible for her to lead her own journey. She refuses taking care of her husband’s child from his first marriage and to move to Isfahan because she needs her voluntary job at Baran to feel useful and has a meaningful life working with veterans and disabled people like herself (Aktaş, 2012, p.52). Unlike many women who think marriage is compulsory, Efsun decides to leave the love of her life because she realizes that Selman expects Efsun to give up on herself (Aktaş, 2012, p.57). With this collapse crashing around her ears, Efsun falls into the trap of the same male-centered discourse “feeling hopeless that she will not be able to meet anyone again now that she is old”, a war veteran and divorced. Therefore, she hastens and accepts to meet the man her sister Mina recommends.

At the same time, Aktaş criticizes feminist activists through the female character Mina, who fails to support her own life and her sister at home. Mina never took the time to listen and understand Efsun’s feelings as a sister and when Efsun meets Bünyamin she realizes that her sister did not tell him about her arm and feels humiliated when Bünyamin stares at her arm (Aktaş, 2012, p.44). Subsequently, Efsun feels double trapped by her sister and Bünyamin because he acts as if Efsun is an “Oriental object” who can make him feel in Iran abroad. Bünyamin is not interested in Efsun as a person and wants to still his homesickness through Efsun because she is Iranian; however, Efsun is disgusted by his behaviors since Bünyamin is an immature man who cannot even introduce himself proudly as a Muslim and tells people that his name is Benjamin (Aktaş, 2012, p.49). Therefore, Efsun leaves him behind and goes back to Iran while her sister Mina forces her to go back and not miss this chance; Efsun decides to follow her own path and refuses to be suppressed by her sister or Bünyamin (Aktaş, 2012, p.46). She also tells the reader that Mina is betrayed by her husband Şahap with a young painter and he forced Mina to accept this affair because the other woman inspires him.

Efsun questions her sister's feminist ideals and asks her sister how she can endure Şahap's betrayal and continue living with him (Aktaş, 2012, p.296). To conclude, the modern and socialist feminist activist Mina living in Germany could not follow her individual path, but her sister Efsun in Iran (always showed as inferior) refused to be seen as an orientalized, disabled, emotionless, single identity and followed her individual path.

In *Seni Dinleyen Biri*, it is possible to see various Islamic understandings, groups, and movements in Turkey showing that the spiritual journey is an individual one and characters do not listen to each other (Aktaş, 2007). These collective statements are deconstructed; none of the characters follow the same sect, interpret, or practice Islam in the same way. Aktaş depicts Muslim women characters that are strong and weak in supporting each other and finding self-fulfillment because they fail to listen to each other's needs in society. Moreover, in this novel, it is possible to see Muslim women actively participating in academic, Islamic, cultural issues, and all characters have a different understanding of Islam. For instance, there is a group called green Muslim activists who visit upper-class Muslim women meetings, celebrations and functions to inform and warn upper-class Muslims not to hire woman preachers who to talk about unnecessary topics in these gatherings. Instead, they should come together and talk about serious problems in the world. These activists also visit the suburbs and inform about the issues of Muslims in the world. They attempt to fight "hürafeler" (superstitions) traditions women love to follow as a ritual in their everyday lives. Therefore, there is a clash between these activists and other groups, sects, neighbors, etc.

First of all, Zeynep abla (sister) as a character represents one of these activist Muslim women starting projects to empower prostitutes as she is aware that more than 2000 women went to brothels to make money to save the day. Her projects aim to help these women out of financial problems and to give them a chance to start again.

Furthermore, there are Muslim students not allowed to stay in student houses belonging to different Islamic groups or foundations because these students read books from different sects or authors or they refuse to participate in the rituals in these houses. Aktaş criticizes these Islamic groups for not accepting Muslims with varying interpretations as they support collectivism and oppress the individual choices of Muslim students. Therefore, Meral is a significant character to show the homelessness of young Muslims in Turkey.

The protagonist Meral wants to wear the scarf, but her parents do not allow her; they represent the laicist binary discourse mentioned above in Turkey. However, Meral rejects this binarism through self-rationalization and tries wearing the veil now and then and joins Zeynep Abla's group to help other women (Aktaş, 2007, p.17). Subsequently, Meral's father throws Meral and her newly converted friend Evrim Ayşe out of his house and calls them green communists (Aktaş, 2007, p.18). Related to this, Aktaş shows the importance of finding a room for Muslim girls like Woolf's conceptualized room for female writers since these students are discriminated in student houses for being different Muslims or repelled from their homes because they want to be pious. Therefore, Meral and her friend Evrim search for a place and refuse to be seen as a collective identity by the Laicist or Muslim patriarchy.

On the other hand, Meral refuses to follow the journey of the man she loves by making clear that her journey is different from his and tells him that she cannot change her name, move with him to a village just because he believes this is better. Despite her love for Halil, Meral refuses to marry him and to live in a town because this would be an escape from one patriarchal force to the other. Meral wants to live in the city where she can develop herself and live independently (Aktaş, 2007, p.71). In short, Meral and the other female characters in *Seni Dinleyen Biri* refuse to be marginalized by collective discourses. They stand up against secular patriarchy, the restriction of multiple

understanding in terms of religion by some Islamic groups and also the laicist authorities oppressing women.

To conclude, the individual journeys of the Muslim female characters in Cihan Aktaş's works prove that Muslim women cannot be considered as collective identities or political subjects. Although they are Turkish, Muslim, and women, these characters have a different understanding of life and Islam and demand to follow their individual journeys. The stories of Şirin, Esmâ, Meral, Efsun, Hürriyet, Süreyya, and Zeynep Abla are all different and only listening to them can show the richness of feminine experience of life. These characters are not idealized or oppressed because Cihan Aktaş aims to deconstruct the binary concepts, whether these are oriental, western, political, or patriarchal. Therefore, Muslim women must write Muslim women who can tell their individual stories instead of being ignored, spoken for, and written by others. In addition, contemporary Muslim women do not lean on others but prefer self-rationalization when it comes to religious matters, in their relationships with men or women.

CHAPTER IV

WOMEN WRITING MEN: PROBLEMATIZING IMMATURITY IN CIHAN AKTAŞ AND LEILA ABOULELA

Throughout history men have written women and women have been depicted as inferior to men. Today women are writing women but they are also writing men. In order to understand how men have been portrayed in previous works, it is necessary to know how male-centered language functioned linguistically. Helen Cixous in her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" referring to Derrida's "logocentric" (western dominance) and "phallus centric" (male dominance) concepts in language argues that language does not belong only to the West or to men and advocates women to find their own language (Cixous, Cohen & Cohen, 1976). Later on, Jacques Derrida combines these concepts as "phallogocentrism," accepting that Male-dominated texts highly influence Western culture (Moran, 1994). In other words, Cixous and Derrida opposed to the binarisms in the "phallogocentric" language since the first binary concept oppresses the latter. Some of these dominating binaries are men/women, west/east/liberal/conservative. Since the first binary oppresses the second, women have subconsciously defined themselves also as inferior to men living in patriarchal societies and using male-dominated language. Thereupon, Helen Cixous deconstructs these binarisms by showing the ugliness of previous male-centered texts enslaving women and seeing her as inferior, urged women to find her own mode of feminine expression and to write her self. She suggested the concept of "Ecriture Feminine" which means a feminine mode of writing in French.

Equivalently, Ayse Saraçgil in her book *Bukalemun Erkek* (Chameleon Man) analyses the male-dominated texts and culture in Turkish literature starting her research from the Ottoman Period and investigates how women have been depicted as slaves and were considered as objects by men in previous Turkish literature (Saraçgil, 2000). The author

puts forth that throughout the modernization process of Turkey; the female characters were expected to modernize, preserving their ethical and religious values, whereas the male characters did not bother to re-define their Muslim identity. While life upgraded, the male characters remained dominant in the family and expected women to preserve their values (Saraçgil, 2000, p.126). They continued seeing women as inferior subjects kept looking down on them in public spaces (Saraçgil, 2000, p.405). By time, their immaturity in integrating and re-defining their identity was seen by Muslim women as a failure, and women writers like Halide Edip Adivar depicted male characters as mislead partners who misunderstood Islam and women. Ahmet Midhat's male character Felatun bey in his book *Felatun bey ile Rakım Efendi* reflects the male characters misinterpreting Westernism and changing their styles but remained irresponsible to women. Similarly, Aysegül Utku Günaydin defines the change of men in this period due to political, cultural and ideological differences as from "Dandini bey" (dandy men) to "maksat adamları" (men of purpose) (Günaydin, 2017). The snobbish male characters can be seen in Halide Edip's novel *Seviyye Talip* (1910) through the male character Fahir looking down on women, not trying to understand women, who never questions himself and is always hasty. Consequently, these attitudes resulted in further alienation and loneliness of women and to her melancholy (Adivar, 1987, p.94).

Halide Edip Adivar has been considered by literary scholars as one of the first productive female writers in the modernization period in Turkey. She is the first writer who constructed modern national identities. Through the 'author's feminine gaze, it is possible to see that women felt the need to problematize the immaturity of male characters who failed to integrate and to re-identify their Muslim identity in a modernizing world. (Adak, 2014, p.189). On the other hand, Halide Edip idealized the Modern Muslim female characters admired by the male characters in her novels. The author depicted the male characters as immature creatures unable to befriend women trying to benefit from them for their sexual desires. The good guys are loyal to the nation and try to integrate into the modernizing world but are lonely like the female

characters. Hülya Adak explains that Halide Edip's female characters were idealized but were not feminine because they were constructed according to the ideals of the patriarchal- national discourse (Adak, 2014, p.163). They are heroic but not female, giving up their individuality for the sake of the nation (Adak, 2014, p.165).

Ayşe Saraçgil examining the history of the Turkish Muslim women movement starting in the 1970s with urbanism explains how Muslim women started to become active in public spaces wearing their veils. They benefitted from the modernization process and attended universities and the business market and started working with men. Saraçgil describes how Muslim women fashion re-shaped and designed the colors, motives, veils through the combination of classic and modern in order to please women by providing more choices. During this modernization period, Muslim women started to redefine their Muslim identity, used their veils to participate actively and comfortably in public spaces, and merged their values benefitting from modernism. On the other hand, Muslim men failed to integrate and redefine their Muslim identity ignoring the changes coming with urban life. Since men refused to re-identify their modern Muslim identities, they continued seeing women as objects (Saraçgil 2005, 405). For this reason, Muslim women portrayed male characters as mislead friends who misunderstood Islam and women. Since then, Muslim women became real subjects who defined their identity, their nature, and their piety.

Ulteriorly, current theorists on Islamic fiction in Turkey and specifically on Muslim women literature discuss that since the 90's; the form of the Islamic novel has changed from a collective narration to a subjective narrative. Kenan Çayır explains this alteration in shape and pattern in his work *Islamic Literature in Contemporary Turkey from Epic to Novel* with the following words,

Western centric Kemalist conception of civilization and performed a transgression of secular boundaries-boundaries that equated "civilization" with the "West"-by Islamic subjects. These subjects,

however, were collective subjects speaking in a language of "we" that was oriented towards group ideals promoted by the literary and intellectual narratives of Islamism. New socialization patterns, the acquisition of new professions, the attendance and transformation of urban spaces, and alternative practices of Islamic precepts in daily life resulted in new subject formations in the 1990s. (Çayır, 2015, p.144)

Thus, the contemporary Muslim writings show novelties and new patterns differentiating themselves from the previous narratives. Using subjective voices instead of a collective voice paved the way for Muslim women writers to question the "myths", "ideals", and "heroes" in previous salvation novels from the '80s. According to Ahmet Sait Akçay in his book *Bellekteki Huriler*, contemporary women writers criticize the salvation novels from the '80s since women were shown inferior and were depicted as poisoning the norms and values of the society and the male characters discipline these flirty girls (Akçay, 2006, p.11). Consequently, the change from salvation to self-critical books in the '90s gave birth to new patterns in Muslim women's writings since contemporary Muslim women criticized the Muslim male characters. Kenan Çayır theorizes this change in his work as,

The new self-critical novels of the 1990s, with their emphasis on the interiority of characters and their focus on the present, are no longer able to be interpreted in light of an (Islamic) absolute past, and thus are closer to "novelistic discourse" in the Bakhtinian sense. (Çayır, 2015, p.159)

Cihan Aktaş' short story *Kusursuz Piknik* (The Flawless Picnic) (Aktaş, 2009) could be considered as an idiom like Helen Cixous "last laugh" since it could be used as an expression to define "the doom of men expecting perfectness from women and are abandoned as a consequence". Prof. Bahtiyar Aslan analyzing the story puts forth that women were regarded as "flawed" throughout history compared to the "perfect men", however, today the modern woman is forced to be "flawless" and is pressurized by the male-dominated discourses (Aslan, 2015). Aslan clarifies the plot in one sentence "this is the story of a judge who was abandoned by his wife who was expected to organize a

flawless picnic for the level officers”. Moreover, the force to have “a perfect picnic” or “a perfect woman” is mocked and criticized by Aktaş because idealizing women oppress women even more as they will feel insufficient and get tired of showing the best of herself in order not to be blamed.

Succeedingly, while reading the novels and stories of Cihan Aktaş and Leila Aboulela, it became evident that the male characters are mainly portrayed as immature, irresponsible, or inconsiderate towards female characters. Both authors allowed their female characters to question the binarism of the male-centered texts in previous works. The Modern Muslim male characters are like a burden instead of a friend for women, and this “burden” has been questioned, criticized, asked to think rational, described as a kid depending on others, shown manners, if possible led to the right path and brought back to the family; if not, they are left behind. This repeating pattern gains ground in Cihan Aktaş’s and Leila Aboulela’s writings as their works focus on subjective narration rather than collective narration. Both aim to deconstruct the backward and neo-oriental images of the Muslim female characters and question the “ideal hero” to request from their male characters to be self-critical.

In this chapter, I will examine the immaturities of the male characters Faruk in *Şirin’in Düğünü* (Şirin’s wedding), Halil from *Seni Dinleyen Biri* (Someone listening to you) by Cihan Aktaş, Anwar and Tamer from *Minaret* and Rae from *the Translator* by Leila Aboulela since the authors have written about a common dilemma of contemporary Muslim women. It seemed more accurate to show various samples of immaturities in order to clarify the concept “Problematizing the Modern Muslim Man” in current Muslim women’s writings since less has been written about women writing men. The questioning of the Modern Muslim man will be explained respectively related to the “modernity paradigm,” the instability of male characters in familial relationships, the irrational demands of male characters and their unreliability in terms of religious issues.

4.1 The Modernity Paradigm and the Immaturity of Male Characters

According to Elifhan Köse in *Sessizliği Söylemek*, there is a search for the loss of masculinity in contemporary Muslim women literature (Köse, 2014, p.101). She discusses in her chapter “Dindar Edebiyatta Umutsuz Arayış: Kaybolan Erkeklik”, (the hopeless search in religious literature, the loss of masculinity) how the concept of masculinity used to be narrated in salvation novels (Hidayet romanları) (Köse, 2014, p.104) and how this resemblance differed in contemporary Muslim women literature. It can be understood from Elifhan Köse’s analysis that in the ’90s, Muslim women writers were aware of problems stemming from modernity and as a result; women writers believed that it was time to question Muslim men and their capability to deal with modernity. Köse mentions Fatma Barbarosoğlu, Muslim female author, who realized in these writings that men were depicted as incapable of coping with the paradigms of modernism while it was easier for the women to adapt (Köse, 2014, p.103).

Related to this concept, it can be understood that feminine language allowed women writers to tell the immaturity of male characters in order to show that “idealism” is a myth and “the ideal male heroes” do not exist. The authors deconstructed the binarism of previously constructed male literature intending to show men that they should redefine their identity as a Muslim and take the responsibility to support women. For instance, Najwa in *Minaret* knows all secrets of Tamer and his family because she babysits for them and literally takes care and looks after the whole family patiently. In this way, the imperfections and leakages of Tamer and his family are shown through Najwa, their babysitter (Aboulela, 2015).

First of all, in Cihan Aktaş’ latest novel *Şirin’in Düğünü*, (Şirin’s wedding), Faruk is the lover and future husband of the main character Şirin and reflects the new generation upper-class Modern Muslim man, alienated and disconnected from his roots and values. The characters are not what they seem and Faruk, the son of a rich and powerful company owner, is weak and lacks the strength and capability of being

responsible and mature. His father refused to assign him the executive powers of the company since he was unable to finish his studies. Also, he could not face his father's authority at work and lost the trust of his family due to the shameful news published in magazines about his reckless relationship with women.

To illustrate further, in *Seni Dinleyen Biri* (Someone Listening to You), Halil is incapable of coping with the paradigms of modernism, and this incapability makes him jump from one ideology to the other, from one city to the other and from one woman to the other. Halil disavowed city life and urbanization because he followed a spiritual leader called "the Belgian Sufi" and subsequently Halil moved to live the ideal, simple, and uncorrupted life in Siirt. To his surprise, this spiritual leader influencing many like Halil had returned to city life, and after hearing the rumors of this return, Halil still did not accept and admit that this ideology was a failure (Aktaş, 2007, p.341). Finally, Halil was incapable of holding onto life without modernism, technology, and science because he missed the advantages of technology and education and picked up his studies. Also, his ideas about marrying a plain and illiterate girl changed, and he could not stay away from city life (Aktaş, 2007, p.365). Halil's incapability led to the distrust of people around him because he became an unreliable man who was unable to find rest in today's modern world.

Likewise, in *Minaret* by Leila Aboulela, all men in Najwa's life are failures: Her dad is blamed for being a corrupt politician and is hanged in Sudan, her brother Omar is a spoiled kid and jailed for stabbing and almost killing someone (Aboulela, 2015, p.196), the guy she loves in her youth, Anwar, is an atheist and leftist who refuses to admit the negative results of the coup which he supported thoroughly once. When finally, the coup takes place in Sudan, dictatorship comes, and he is forced to fly to Britain. Anwar refuses to accept that the coup was a failure and keeps insisting on the idea that Najwa's father and the previous government was corrupted. He often rebukes Najwa ignoring the fact that his "ideas" might hurt Najwa deeply because he is her father.

Significantly here, Anwar uses the term “modern” and “modernism” for his own interests and benefits and abuses Najwa. For instance, when she wants to have a stable relationship, he acts as if she is backward and that marriage is evil, knowing very well that Najwa has a modest nature. In this sense, Anwar represents the spoiled modern kid and acts childish as he does not give credit to Najwa’s arguments and always wants to be the winner of each discussion. Anwar is not only abusive but also ignores to come up for Najwa when one of his home mates harasses her leaning to her body. Ultimately, Najwa realizes that she has to preserve her sensitive nature and is forced to end this relationship because Anwar is far from being a mature, rational and reliable person and fails to provide a better future for himself and Najwa.

After starting a new page and following her individual journey, Najwa meets a more religious and devoted young man, Tamer, who is the son of an upper-class Muslim family living in Britain, however, he is also immature and fails to solve his problems with his family, to follow his ideals and to come up for his relationship with Najwa. For instance, when Tamer finds out that his mother bought a non-halal chicken from Tesco, he questions Najwa for not stopping his mother ignoring the fact that she is just their babysitter and his mother is her boss (Aboulela, 2015, p.206). He refuses to eat the chicken, not believing that Najwa will cook the thing as if Najwa has a choice (Aboulela, 2015, p.207). His manner is described as careless and childish by Najwa, and she feels upset about the way he talks with his mother

I hear them talking in the next room. He sounds childish and nagging. She brushes his arguments aside, saying he is silly, saying he is making a big fuss over nothing. It is a mistake; he becomes aggressive and raises his voice. I freeze, the kitchen knife poised in my hand, as echoes of other quarrels and other mothers ring in my ears. But Omar and Tamer are miles apart, miles apart. I try and reach him. I whisper, ‘Control yourself, control yourself, it’s not worth it. You will regret your rudeness afterwards; your sensitive nature will be troubled. (Aboulela, 2015, p.207)

Tamer cannot control his anger, or propose acceptable points in a discussion, come over as a mature person, and deal with a problem like a grown-up. Najwa becomes aware that Tamer's family lives far beyond Islamic ideals just like many upper-class wealthy Muslim families; however, she manages not to hurt anyone because she knows that it has nothing to do with religion but more with issues such as class differences, education and the nature of a person. Tamer, on the other hand, acts childish, nags, and reacts with a fury to settle things instead of behaving rational and coming to an agreement with his parents. On top of it, Tamer leaves home instead of finding a way to fix the problem with his family and Najwa. Therefore, Najwa is supposed to solve this issue for him, but this time sacrificing their relationship for his future and happiness being aware that Tamer is not the man to carry himself or her at all.

Different from the other characters but related to the same issue, Rae from *The Translator*, is a successful academician and an expert in Middle Eastern studies, has an interest in Islam, however, despite believing in God and that the Quran is a sacred text (Aboulela, 2010, p.93) he does not convert to Islam. His immaturity prevents him from confessing to himself and others that he is a Muslim because this will make him lose his credibility and bring a new responsibility. It is "a modern thing" states Yasmin to Sammar (Aboulela, 2010, p.93) that academicians are interested in their fields but merely as an outsider. She tells Sammar that it would be a "professional suicide" for Rae to convert,

Because no one will take him seriously after that. What would he be? Another ex-hippy gone off to join some weird cult. Worse than a weird cult, the religion of terrorists and fanatics. That's how it would be seen. He's got enough critics as it is: those who think he is too liberal, those who would even accuse him of being a traitor just by telling the truth about another culture. (Aboulela, 2010, p.22)

Rae knows a lot about Islam, maybe even more than many Muslims by birth; however, he never considered his spiritual nature and converting to Islam until meeting Sammar.

He can take this step only after Sammar who motivated him to find self-fulfillment in Islam and life in general. Thus, it can be concluded from the samples of Faruk, Halil, Anwar, Tamer and Rae that male characters despite their different status and conditions failed to modernize and redefine their Muslim identity whereas the female characters like Şirin, Meral, Najwa, and Sammar were supposed to handle or cope with the immaturity of the male characters.

4.2 Contemporary Male Characters in Familial Relationships

Zehra Yılmaz investigates the turn in Islamic women's movement in Turkey and describes Cihan Aktaş as a pioneering author among the Islamic women movement. According to her, Aktaş explained that Muslim women had been questioned in terms of modernism and religious/culture; however, particular issues of women have been delayed or neglected since women were expected to hide their "privacies"(Yılmaz, 2015, p.17). Yılmaz working with Muslim women groups in Turkey concludes that there is a turn in Muslim women's movement in Turkey today. According to her, the present Muslim women teach Islam to men.

Likewise, in Elifhan Köse's study on religious women literature, gender, and body in *Sessizliği Söylemek*, there are many references to Cihan Aktaş' words claiming that in the 90's the middle class and upper-class Muslim women had to struggle for their headscarves, and this return to home led to questioning the irresponsible fathers, bosses, and husbands in contemporary novels (Yılmaz, 2015, p.105). It can be understood from both studies that Cihan Aktaş examined the irresponsibility of the Muslim men to problematize the particular issues of Muslim women neglected or delayed in previous novels. Cihan Aktaş criticized and depicted in her contemporary books the immaturity of male characters in familial relationships through characters like Faruk, Halil, and Şahap. These characters are far from the previous characters in terms of being the "ideal husband". Similarly, in Leila Aboulela's works, the male

characters are criticized for being unstable, irresponsible, and weak in familial relationships, and this can be seen profoundly through Anwar, Tamer, and Rae.

In *Şirin'in Düğünü*, (Şirin's wedding), the author emphasized Faruk's reckless and irremediable relationship with women. Faruk falls quickly in love or is entrapped in a relationship by women but does not take responsibility in his relationships. For instance, he falls in love with Maria in Italy and convinces her to convert to Islam, to change her country, her name and marry him; however, then he gets bored of her and keeps neglecting her after their marriage. He escapes from his responsibilities as a husband and a father and blames Maria for his irresponsible behaviors when he is criticized by his family (Aktaş, 2016a, p.79). The female protagonist Şirin is disappointed and humiliated many times by Faruk as well. Faruk marries Şirin; however, it is Şirin who does the "herculean task", who pierces the holes in mountains out of her love for Faruk and not Faruk as it is in the mythological love story "Ferhat and Şirin". Cihan Aktaş deconstructed the clichés and reconstructed an active female character, Şirin who speaks for herself, questions, and disciplines her immature lover patiently.

In *Seni Dinleyen Biri* (Someone Listening to You) Halil is emphasized among the immature male characters and his inconsistency is stressed a lot. First of all, Halil fails to love women in his relationships because he sees women as objects. He disrespects Meral's choices and concerns and pushes her to do as he wishes and leaves her behind marrying an illiterate woman, Muhlise (Aktaş, 2007, p.311). Secondly, He gets bored and disgusted when his ideas change about a dull life; he leaves Muhlise and the baby for days alone and starts calling Meral being bored of Muhlise. Thirdly, he asks Meral to come to Urfa and marry him saying that he did not marry Muhlise legally and this marriage was not a real marriage (Aktaş, 2007, p.387). Finally, Halil does not care about Muhlise's financial needs and does not appreciate Muhlise's efforts at home to please him and always finds a way to hurt her feelings (Aktaş, 2007, p.403). As a result, Halil keeps disappointing all women in his life.

In *Sınıra Yakın* (close to the border), Efsun's sister, Mina, is a so-called activist and feminist but has devoted her life to her husband, gave up her studies and works as a chauffeur to buy a house for her family. However, her husband, Şahap, betrayed her and expected her sympathy by not allowing her to divorce him. He asks Mina to accept the existence of the German painter, the other woman, and inspiration for his works as an artist. Mina afraid of being a single-divorced woman with children accepted this request to win him back to the family (Aktaş, 2012, p.300). While Efsun left her husband because he was careless, Mina preferred to stay and nurture the immature and irresponsible men back home to the family and home.

Likewise, in Leila Aboulela, this pattern is repeated, and the immaturity of the male characters is apparent. For instance, in *Minaret*, the male character Anwar depicted as a clear-cut, not open to criticism person and can use the weakness or sins of Najwa's family against her to win a discussion. While Najwa has lost her family and requires stability; Anwar uses her for checking his English grammar mistakes (Aboulela, 2015, p.156). He does not propose to her or does not see his relationship with her as a serious relationship and demands her to be "modern" to use her. The main reason for leaving him will be Anwar's carelessness and playing the blind man towards his home mate who leans to her body and abuses her.

On the other hand, Tamer also fails to become a family for Najwa. First of all, Najwa is older than Tamer, but the conflict is Tamer's immaturity dealing with a relationship. For instance, before solving his familial problems, Tamer proposes to Najwa because he thinks she is the only one to understand him. Without struggling first to settle issues with his family and being financially independent, he proposes to Najwa, who is just a babysitter of his parents and can quickly lose the job she needs to survive. Instead of protecting Najwa's position and emotions, he rebels to his parents like a kid (Aboulela, 2015, p.212). Since Tamer fails to come up for his life and relationship, Najwa deals with Tamer's mother on behalf of him so that Tamer can study Islamic history instead

of business and in return, she will end her relationship with their son (Aboulela, 2015, p.265). When Tamer learns about this deal, he cries and leaves Najwa instead of finding ways to convince his parents and to come up for their love. He is immature to realize how deep Najwa is humiliated by his mother's words who offered money to get out of her son's life, the colossal sacrifice Najwa made for his happiness and most importantly, Tamer is not strong enough to carry Najwa, to fight for her pleasure and to provide the home and family she is in need of (Aboulela, 2015, p.268).

Rae in *the Translator* explains his immaturity in his first marriage to Sammar as escaping from confronting his wife and having enough of their quarrels (Aboulela, 2010, p.40). Furthermore, Rae is indecisive and unstable while Sammar is sure of her decisions and reacts bewildered that he has been divorced twice aiming to make him consider that his instability led to failures in his familial relationships (Aboulela, 2010, p.129). Sammar's reaction is harsh because she requires a family and to find a home somewhere after losing her husband (Aboulela, 2010, p.21). However, Rae ignores Sammar's feelings and their conditions, keeping his instability until Sammar is forced to take a distance. He regrets his actions and converts at the end confessing that he failed to stand with Sammar or took the responsibility to come up for their relationship in the first place.

As a conclusion, the contemporary Muslim male characters having failed to define their modern Muslim identity show their instabilities and immaturities in familial relationships. It is possible to see how these male characters have left women alone or expect women to carry the responsibilities of the family. Contemporary Muslim women fail to find a home or a family in Muslim men. Moreover, this insecurity is highlighted in the works of both authors. The repetition of this pattern in their works proves that women writers try to deconstruct the previous concepts like "the ideal husband" or "the ideal hero" in order to self-criticize Muslim men for leaving women alone in familial relationships.

4.3 Problematizing the Irrationality of the Modern Muslim Man

Elifhan Köse examines the body and gender theory of traditional Islamic thought and states that in traditional Islamic thought, gender relations are given unwary and eclectic. Men and women are seen as the parts of the body inseparable from each other; however, men represent the mind while women represent the heart. This metaphor depicts men as the ratio of the body and women as the emotional or merciful part. Related to this, some of the Muslim women writers have not rejected this ideology, but they have embraced “difference” over the definition “equality” between the two sexes (Köse, 2014, p.87).

The body-mind theory is another binarism of male-centered texts and is deconstructed by both authors. Both authors construct their male characters as emotional and show their irrational actions fuelled by the patriarchal culture. The female characters, on the contrary, are expected by the same men to act wisely and take care of them. Efsun is forced to define herself as a middle-aged, “mature” and a “wise” woman in the novel *Sınıra Yakın* (close to the border), and not “the ideal housewife” who is just a typical Iranian beauty, from the pictures on Iranian tea cans. The Muslim woman knows that she is more than “the oriental image” in Bünjamin’s mind; however, he is unaware of his colonized mind (Aktaş, 2014, p.44). In this part, I have focused on the irrational actions of the male characters through Faruk, Halil, and Nimet’s husband, Bünjamin, Idris Abuzeid, Rae, Anwar, and Tamer in order to provide more samples on this topic.

To start with, *Şirin’in Düğünü*, (Şirin’s wedding), Faruk usually follows his desires and escapes from reasoning. For instance, when they meet for the first time in Morocco, Faruk offers to drink wine, but Şirin refuses to consume alcohol as she prefers to be sober and rational while Faruk makes jokes about “not being drunk with a little bit of wine,” but he gets drunk at the end (Aktaş, 2016a, p.239). Furthermore, without thinking about the norms and values or the gossips in the media, Faruk invites Şirin to stay in the same hotel; however, Şirin refuses this offer and he blames her for

“overthinking” and “calculating” everything like a “homegirl” (Aktaş, 2016a, p.246). When sober, Faruk realizes how mature Şirin treated his inconsistency and irrationality; he confesses that he acted emotional and left Şirin behind in Morocco uninformed and “made a mountain out of a molehill” but is sure that she will forgive his immaturity (Aktaş, 2016a, p.266). This contemporary Muslim male character is not only irrational but also demands irrationality from the woman in order to benefit from her. It shows a similar pattern in Halide Edip’s writings, where men left women helpless. When Faruk blames Şirin for being scared to give in to love, Şirin replies that she does not have fears but “concerns” about his behaviors jumping from one woman to another and telling her he does not love those women (Aktaş, 2016a, p.458). In short, it becomes clear that Faruk is depicted as “a spoiled brat” similar to the “dandy” men in previous novels who is in need of a rational woman like Şirin.

In *Seni Dinleyen Biri* (Someone Listening to You), for Halil, the ideal woman is illiterate, plain, does not read much, talk much, knows much and thus can devote herself to her husband (Aktaş, 2007, p.311). This character has embraced the traditional body-mind theory to make life easier for himself, and when his wife Muhlise teaches him Islamic teachings and asks him to teach her how to read and to write in Turkish, Halil refuses because he does not want an independent wife (Aktaş, 2007, p.318). Halil is aware of his irresponsible and irrational behaviors because educated girls like Meral question his desires and choices; however, rural girls like Muhlise have no other choice than obeying their husbands. Interestingly enough, Halil’s ideas about “the ideal,” illiterate and plain women turn upside down as he thinks that his wife is not calm but lazy and feels disgusted for women like Muhlise who have devoted and build their whole identity and life only on their husbands (Aktaş, 2007, p.324).

Halil’s irrationality is due to his quickly shifting so-called “philosophies” serving to solve his sexual desires through women. For instance, Muhlise carries his baby and waits for him to take care of her and the baby, but Halil has lost his interest in his wife and calls

his ex-love Meral and asks her to marry him and to come to Urfa. Meral reacts more rational than Halil and rejects this proposal as he has an Islamic marriage contract and thus has sworn to Allah when he married Muhlise and cannot see it as a simple mistake of Halil. It does not matter whether he is officially married or not, but it matters that he always demands issues against Meral's principles and ratio (Aktaş, 2007, p.388). According to Halil, Meral never made things easier for him, and she was always calculating and acting rationally instead of giving in to their love; however, Meral explains that she could not merely forget her duties as a Muslim and act according to her desires like him (Aktaş, 2007, p.411). This sample shows again that Meral operated as the ratio while Halil behaved irrational and irresponsible in his affairs with women.

In *the Translator*, Aboulela's Sammar deconstructs Western as well as the Muslim patriarchal oppressive voice because Rae is a Western expert and is far from the rational and compelling male character known in general. Sammar and Rae talk about Islamic issues, and although Rae is an expert about Middle Eastern history and Islam, it is Sammar, a Muslim woman who translates for Rae and explains terms to him (Aboulela, 2010, p.83). This time it is a Muslim female character that inspires and leads a man to Islam and not the typical pattern in previous works. Sammar translates and defines the "Shahada" (the testimony to convert to Islam) and teaches Rae the proper way it should be according to Islam (Aboulela, 2010, p.120). Sammar is not just a translator of language but she is translating the right path and religion to a Western man and this is new and against the stereotypical idea of the male "savior" saving the lost woman who needs to be told and lead to the right path in Western or Muslim patriarchal discourses. Obviously, it would be the Muslim men to make the lost woman convert to Islam in previous works or in the western concept the Muslim men would force women to cover. Aboulela deconstructs these concepts through Sammar translating words and religion for a man (Aboulela, 2010, p.41).

Finally, in *Minaret*, the two male characters in Najwa's life are very different from each other in terms of ideology, age, and identity. Anwar is at the same age as Najwa, and they fall in love at the university in Sudan. After the coup, Anwar and Najwa are forced to leave the country, and they meet again in London, but Anwar is incapable of confessing that the outcomes of the coup in Sudan was unsuccessful and brought the country backward instead of forward and his prejudice towards Najwa's father has not changed but turned into a hobbyhorse. Anwar pushes to be always right in any discussion with people, although he can be wrong (Aboulela, 2015, p.104). Moreover, Najwa's English is better, and Anwar wants her to correct his grammar mistakes; however, he reacts like an immature kid who cannot accept criticism (Aboulela, 2015, p.107) and sneer at her out of nowhere,

'You and your family must be the Home Office's ideal asylum seekers - a flat in London, bank accounts filled with the money your father swindled.' Yes, we had the flat but the bank accounts were not full. He said, 'Don't try to kid me, I'm not stupid.' We quarreled. I hated quarrelling with him, hated that I would explain and explain yet he never believed me. And he had a knack of winning arguments even when I was in the right, even when I was telling the truth. 'Your father must have had another account then, offshore, somewhere else - Switzerland. It's ironic that you can't get hold of the money but believe me it's there. (Aboulela, 2015, p.112)

It can be understood that Najwa does not feel safe with Anwar and slowly realizes that he will never change his negative attitude towards her because of his obsession with the past but also fails to question himself. Najwa is forced to take distance and leave him because she knows he will never find a way to rationalize with her, and she needs someone who can see her intelligence and capabilities.

Different from Anwar, Tamer is younger than Najwa, but they can communicate quite well because Najwa listens and understands Tamer due to her maturity. Najwa also shares a lot with Tamer because they both have a spiritual nature and desire self-fulfillment in Islam. However, Tamer is not rational but "childish", nagging" because he

fails to control his anger. He proposes in an abruptness to Najwa without thinking about the consequences for both, whereas Najwa responds, making fun of him, and he feels humiliated because he realizes his immaturity (Aboulela, 2015, p.141). Tamer's irrationality is not just related to the age, but his attitude and behavior towards others and Najwa is expected to take care of the rational part because Tamer behaves too emotional when it comes to issues with his family about his education, religious discussions with his family or his relationship with Najwa. As a result of this irrationality, Najwa takes the responsibility to talk with his parents and to decide what is better for his future and sacrifices her feelings leaving him behind.

Thus, in contemporary Muslim women writing it can be seen that male characters are far more emotional representing the heart in the body and mind theory whereas the female characters are forced to represent the rational or the mind. Both authors depict various samples of irrational male characters in their works in order to deconstruct the binarism of the Western and Muslim male-centered texts. They describe how these characters are more realistic than the previous "ideal", "sinless", "clever" heroes leading "the fallen angels" to the right path and also how Muslim women do not need to be saved by anyone since they can self-rationalize and save themselves.

4.4 Questioning Patriarchal Authority in Terms of Religion

Contemporary Muslim theologians studying the feminine interpretation and translation of the Qoran and the hadiths (statements of the prophet) and female "mufassirs" (interpreter and translator) have increased rapidly as Muslim women compared to the past, educate themselves and feel the need to express their identity as a Modern Muslim woman to macro discourses. The studies of female Muslim scholars interpreting the Qoran became phenomenal topics in academia since Islam has been shown as oppressive towards Muslim women and women have been frequently questioned whether they are oppressed or not. Related to this, Professor Hidayet

Aydar and Mehmet Atalay explain the reason and the consequences of female interpretations as,

Since it was translated and interpreted overwhelmingly by men, the male perspective became dominant in the vast majority of the translations and interpretations of the Quran. Moreover, for the same reason, women learned about the Quranic issues peculiar to them through the male perspective. However, some female scholars of the Quran somewhat challenged that male perspective. (Aydar & Atalay, 2014, p.3)

It can be understood that male scholars in the past interpreted and translated Islam for women until recently and female scholars began questioning their male-centered commentaries since they did not represent Islam and it was primarily based on male superiority. Professor Hülya Altunya briefly touches on the superiority of men in these male-centered texts by the first Muslim scholars in history referring to Ibni Sina (Avicenna) and Ghazali, who interpreted women as inferior and more sinful in their works (Altunya, 2016, p.99). Furthermore, Muslim feminist academicians in the West like Asma Barlas felt the need to problematize the previous patriarchal interpretations since Western feminists showed the Qoran as male-centered and oppressing women (Barlas, 2019). Eventually, Muslim academicians have questioned the patriarchal interpretations and explained that the Qoran, the word of God is timeless, that God and the language of the Qoran have no gender and therefore it is open to individual interpretations and appeals to all times.

Related to the above, Muslim women writers have also aimed to deconstruct the idea that men lead women to Islam since they believe that the spiritual journey is an individual one, that men have shown women as inferior in previous works and that the Modern Muslim man failed to re-identify his Muslim identity in a changing world and forgot his responsibilities. Thus, the traditional concepts and patterns are turned upside down in contemporary Muslim women literature, and the reliability in religious affairs is given to female characters. In this sense, it could be said that contemporary

novels are deconstructing and attempting to bring justice to the previous, traditional, and weak image of Muslim women and this can be seen in Leila Aboulela and Cihan Aktaş' works through Faruk, Halil, Ayşe's boss, Bünyamin, Rae, Anwar, and Tamer.

In *Şirin'in Düğünü*, (Şirin's wedding) Faruk is represented as the unreliable male character in terms of religion. At the very beginning of the novel, the author explains that Faruk's first wife Maria was a Christian and had converted to Islam because of her great interest in Islam, however, she felt disappointed after her relationship with Faruk who was irresponsible and unjust to her in their marriage and questioned him when he returned from Cyprus whether this was the Islam he used to tell her before they got married (Aktaş, 2016a, p.84).

Furthermore, during the novel it can be understood that although Faruk comes from a conservative Muslim background, his views about Muslim women with a headscarf is negative, and he believes that Muslim women should work and live somewhere but not in his company, far from his life and for this reason; he dislikes Şirin's friendship with Esmâ as he thinks these "scarfed girls" always create problems (Aktaş, 2016a, p.491). Related to this, Faruk does not want his wife Şirin to cover her hair with a scarf as he thinks other people will think he forced her into this (Aktaş, 2016a, p.532) and makes up unsupported stories about scarfed girls and besmirches Esmâ saying that she wears a scarf because she is ugly and wants to hide her prominent chin (Aktaş, 2016a, p.561). It can be understood that Faruk's attitudes and behaviors are a deconstruction of the previous heroic portrayals of Muslim men leading the "flirty women" to Islam. Also, it is possible to see that the male characters are influenced by the Western and Laicist binary concepts about "Muslim women wearing the veil must be oppressed by their husbands" or "Muslim women with a veil create problems".

Similarly, in *Seni Dinleyen Biri* (Someone Listening to You) Ayşe's boss known as a religious and a conservative man is unreliable as he does not treat Ayşe equal like the others. He is incapable of placing her somewhere in his bureau because he is

dominated by the negative ideas about scarfed women and treats her unequal. Ayşe is somewhere in between the bureau and the kitchen, and her boss tries to hide her or not see her (Aktaş, 2007, p.253). This unreliability shows that Muslim men are incapable of dealing with religious issues in public spaces because they are afraid and oppressed by the laicist concepts. In this sense, the male characters are more a saddle than support for Muslim women workers.

On the other hand, the sheik (Islamic spiritual leader) of Halil is against scarfed girls protesting to study at universities where they will be in mixed classes with men. He thinks that it creates chaos and fuss (Aktaş, 2007, p.316). Instead of showing their support and understanding towards their Muslim sisters, spiritual leaders like Halil's sheikh preach against them in order to maintain patriarchal superiority over women and indirectly give their support to the unequal attitude of the patriarchal system. Subsequently, the daughter of this Sheikh (Muhlise) will become the wife of Halil and will suffer in her marriage because her husband by time will see her as an aimless, lazy, and backward woman. Related to all, instability leads also to unreliability in religious affairs and this can be seen most evidently in the male character, Halil, as he is jumping from one Islamic ideology to the other during the novel and people often question these quick turns as they see inconsistency in all affairs in his life (Aktaş, 2007, p.395).

In *Sınıra Yakın* (close to the border), Cihan Aktaş uses the inferiority complex of Muslims living in the West trying to hide their Islamic identity from others since they want to show how "modern" and "developed" they are, however, they fell in the same trap of the colonizer like Edward Said. Sumit Chakrabarti argues in her article "Moving Beyond Edward Said: Homi Bhabha and the Problem of Postcolonial Representation" that Edward Said fell in the same trap of the colonizer pointing to Homi Bhabha's "The Other Question" with the following words,

This is how the inherent politics of binarism is played out. Many Third-World intellectuals dealing with the politics of colonization failed to

notice the implicit paradox within this system of operation. Whereas the consistent 'other'ing of the colonized is used to situate the West in a position of binary superiority, the complete knowability or visibility of the subject people is also assumed, as if the paradigms of Western systems of knowledge have managed to know or read the 'other' completely. (Chakrabarti, 2012, p.8)

Likewise, in the novel, Bünyamin, whom Efsun meets in order to settle within marriage, turns out to be confused, in between, an immature Muslim man living in Germany far from his religious and Persian roots. He tells Efsun that he introduces himself sometimes with the Jewish version of his name "Benjamin" in Germany and not always as a Muslim (Aktaş, 2012, p.49). He also consumes alcohol and behaves and acts in such a way that Efsun can understand his inferiority complex. These behaviors show Efsun the unreliability of Bünyamin in religious affairs since he is tricked by the same inferiority complex and lost his ties with Iran and his Islamic identity. Moreover, he objectifies Efsun's appearance with the "oriental" and typical eastern beauty on the Iranian tea cans and wants to marry Efsun to feel his roots and culture in his house in Germany. Efsun is aware of Bünyamin's immaturity and feels disappointed to have met him since she cannot rely on his religiosity and lifestyle far from the principles in Islam and her principles.

Male scholars and academicians are also immature in terms of religious affairs, and this can be seen in *the Translator* by Leila Aboulela through Rae. Rae is a Scottish expert on the Middle East and has specialized in Islamic studies and terrorism because he admires Islam. However, Rae knowing all about Islam and the Middle Eastern culture was not mature enough to convert to Islam because this would be a "professional suicide" and nobody would take Rae seriously as an expert if he would become Muslim writing about Islam (Aboulela, 2010). Leila Aboulela mocks the ironical attitude of Western academia towards religious expertise through Rae who as an outsider is taken for granted and is afraid to lose his credibility if he converts to Islam (Aboulela, 2010).

At the same time, Rae fails to take responsibility for his relationship with his translator, Sammar. She is a Muslim woman and helps him with translations in Arabic, and they get closer by time; however, Rae is unsure and immature to convert and to be a religious man. When Rae insists on not being sure, Sammar asks him clearly why he started and continued getting closer to her while he knew very well what results it would bring (Aboulela, 2010, p.122). In fact, Rae is well-informed about the Islamic culture and laws, and he is quite conscious that Sammar is a religious woman and there is no other way for them to unite according to Islamic thought; however, he confesses that he is not the man to be religious and studied Islam only to know more about the Middle East (Aboulela, 2010, p.123). Eventually, Sammar is forced to ask Rae to convert and marry her, but this is not easy for Sammar, and she feels as if she has no pride left requesting this from him (Aboulela, 2010, p.125),

Why did you talk to me then? From the beginning, why did you start all this. You should have just left me alone. You had no right. If you were content in your religion . . . 'I'm not content, there are too many things I can't justify to myself. Of course I'm not content. Isn't it obvious to you? (Aboulela, 2010, p.128)

Although it felt horrible to start this conversation, Sammar had to do this in order to settle her life and find her comfort zones back after losing her husband. Sammar is trapped between her emotions and her religious ideals, feels difficulty explaining to herself and her Muslim friends why she gets close and continues this affair with a non-Muslim man, Rae. It will be difficult for Rae and Leila Aboulela shows how Rae needs to be led to the right path by Sammar instead of the male character leading Sammar to religion, he needs to be convinced to do what is in his nature and to take the responsibility of their relationship. Before meeting Sammar, this would be impossible for Rae because he never thought he would need spirituality and regrets,

'What I regret most,' he said, 'is that I used to write things like "Islam gives dignity to those who otherwise would not have dignity in their lives", as if I didn't need dignity myself.' A fly hovered over the tray,

buzzing. She waved it away. He said, 'I was a little taken aback. I didn't think of myself as someone who would turn spiritual . . ."I did. I used to feel that there was something inside you very heavy and still.' (Aboulela, 2010, p.199)

Accordingly, Sammar could see and feel the spirituality in Rae, allowing him to consider by leaving him until he could take this step alone and take the responsibility to convert. It was this departure and shock arousing Rae from an illusion and finally to convert, but this could only occur with the help of Sammar and not vice versa (Aboulela, 2010, p.189). In contradiction to the previous works, it is the Muslim female character, Sammar, who translated and led Rae to Islam patiently bearing and waiting for Rae's acceptance of Islam instead of the male character leading the lost woman character to the holy path.

In *Minaret*, all men in Najwa's life; her father, Anwar (her leftist youth lover) and Tamer (the religious son of the family she works for) fail to help or lead Najwa to become a better person in terms of religion. It is only possible taking a distance from them that can bring Najwa closer to God. Anwar sees religion as backward and mocks people who are religious as he is a leftist or an atheist as Najwa states later. Sudan is more than Islam for Anwar but Najwa deep inside longs for the peaceful days of Ramadan. After realizing that Anwar abuses her misusing the concept of "modernism" against religion, she decides to leave him and starts living a modest life away from people and worldly things. British upper-class Muslim men are criticized as well; for instance, Tamer's father refuses to accept Tamer to study Islamic history and looks down upon his son's desire to learn and practice Islam effectively. He prefers and forces his son to study business and to make more money. Leila Aboulela just like Cihan Aktaş deconstructs the "ideal" or "mythical" contemporary Muslim families in order to show that Muslim families differ and have their own motivations not related to Islam at all and cannot be seen as a single identity.

To finalize, both authors have deconstructed the previous concept of Muslim men leading women to Islam and the idea that Muslim women are inferior to men in previous male-centered works. Muslim women do not “need to be saved” by Western feminists as Muslim women interpret and translate Islam to the West, to Muslim men and reidentify themselves accordingly. In this way, readers can find Muslim characters who are not all fanatics or radicals as it is portrayed in the media and see how strong and mature Muslim women are in their everyday lives leading men to religion instead of being forced to be religious by their fathers or husbands. Moreover, both authors show the immaturity of men in religious affairs in their works and the previously depicted male characters as “sinless” and “superior” to women is reconstructed by showing the failure of Muslim men merging their Islamic identity with the developing and modernizing world. These works could be considered as self-reflexive novels and self-criticism since these authors deconstruct the binary discourses to problematize the irresponsibility of present Muslim men leaving women alone. Thusly, Muslim women demand from the contemporary Muslim men to practice the actual Islam and support Muslim women by acting rational and taking responsibilities in the family.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study is not to conclude that Muslim women or men are as follows or not as shown. It aims more to problematize that seeing Muslims as a collective identity is problematic since they are unique and have their own stories. Therefore, it is incorrect to analyze them from a single framework or concept. As Saba Mahmood and Lila Abu-Lughod suggest, it is crucial to listen to the individual journeys of these women and to emphasize the importance of studying how Muslim women try to redefine their Muslim identities every day. For this reason, scholars should listen more than assuming on behalf of their subjects.

As Virginia Woolf and Helen Cixous declare, women need their own room, their own language, and to write themselves defining the self independently. Likewise, Muslim women, today need their own discourse more than ever since they have been defined and colonized throughout history. With this intention, I have followed the journeys of Muslim female characters constructed in the works of two pioneering contemporary Muslim women writers: Leila Aboulela and Cihan Aktaş. Consequently, this study made it possible to observe the main concerns and struggles of contemporary Muslim women who demand to express their identities independently. The most common concern is to identify their Muslim personalities individually and peacefully in Britain and Turkey.

Moreover, I have analyzed the contemporary Muslim male characters through the eyes of female characters in order to understand how they are represented in contemporary Muslim women's writings. It became evident that both authors problematized the contemporary Muslim male characters and repeated this pattern in their works. Many scholars have discussed and criticized men writing women, however, less is written

about women writing men. Therefore, it was the most challenging part, and I have tried to contribute by examining the literary works of the authors clarifying the reasons for questioning the contemporary Muslim man. In this part, I have referred to the studies of various scholars and authors in order to analyze this issue from multiple fields.

To clarify, the immature portrayal of men in Muslim women's literature is not intended to show some kind of revenge or to show men evil but rather to demand and remind men to re-think and re-identify their Muslim identities in today's globalizing world. They are expected to take the responsibility of learning and practicing the actual Islam by supporting women and taking responsibilities in familial relationships. As it can be understood from the constructions of contemporary Muslim female characters, there are no "idealized," "flawless," "imperfect" characters and the male characters are also urged to self-rationalize and question their errors.

Since this is a master thesis, and time is quite limited, it was not possible to examine and talk about the works of more authors. Furthermore, it might have been better to enrich the study with various other concepts, but then, it could overwhelm the study and the analysis from the books. For the same reason, there could be more analysis from the fictive works; however, more analysis could overlap the concepts.

Last but not least, Muslim women today are more powerful in the globalizing world, undefining and shattering the stereotypes by challenging the collective, binary, dominant discourses. These women show that they are more than the "oppressed" or "resisting" stereotypes and do not need saving. Essentially, Muslim women are authors, educators, researchers, scholars, doctors, artists, activists, politicians etc. and they give inspiration through literature offering rich portrayals of Muslims and encourage people to break the norms, question their truths, and find their best expression in life.

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