

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Background of The Study

Living in a culture where women are primarily targeted for social marginalization eventually results in a mental capacity throughout generations to believe in gender inequity (McCall, 2005, p. 1777). The complex intersection of race, gender, and religion creates unique experiences for individuals positioned at these intersections, particularly for Muslim women of color living in Western societies. As Collins (2000: p. 18) articulates, these intersecting systems of oppression function as a “matrix of domination” that cannot be understood through single-axis thinking. Muslim women’s identities and experiences are shaped not by isolated factors but by the simultaneous interaction of their racial background, gender, and religious side. This intersectional approach was first conceptualized by Crenshaw (1989: p. 140), illuminating how the intersection of racism and sexism factors into women of color’s lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately. Abu-Lughod (2013: p. 7) notes that Muslim women are often portrayed through reductive frameworks that ignore the diversity of their lived experiences, resulting in what she terms the persistence of colonial feminism that constructs different cultures and religions as inherently oppressive to women. These intersecting identities create what Zine (2006: p. 240) describes as “gendered Islamophobia”, where Muslim women face discrimination not only as women and as people of color but also specifically as Muslim women, often visibly identifiable through their religious attire.

The intersection of race, gender, and religion creates unique forms of marginalization that are particularly evident in literary representations. Literary works like Leila Aboulela’s *Minaret* offer critical spaces for challenging these intersections of race, gender, religion, and stereotypical representations. The novel provides a complex picture of Muslim women of color facing systemic and social

prejudices. Set against the backdrop of London's immigrant community, the story follows Najwa, a Sudanese woman who experiences a profound social and cultural transformation from a privileged background in Sudan to working as a domestic worker in Britain. Through Najwa's narrative, Aboulela expertly navigates the complex intersections of race, gender, and religious identity, showing how Muslim women of color are often trapped within narrow, externally imposed stereotypes of victimhood, submissiveness, or exoticism. Najwa's journey illuminates the multilayered experiences of displacement, cultural adaptation, and personal agency, challenging the monolithic representations that redefine Muslim women's simplified, homogenous identities.

In the novel, Aboulela's interpretation of Islam and its relationship with the West challenges the dominant Western narrative and explores the complexities of identity and representation. However, the focus of this study is specifically on uncovering how race, gender, and religion intersect to shape the major character, Najwa, as she faces systemic inequity and social expectations. These intersections construct the marginalization and agency of the major character and lead to discrimination that influences Najwa's life and choices. Rather than examining the narrative solely through the lens of Islamic feminism, the writer deals with the broader issue that women of color, particularly Muslim women of color, deserve recognition for their rights, free from stereotyping and marginalizing depictions that reduce their experiences to victimhood or submissiveness. Through this perspective, this study aims to reveal how the intersections of race, gender, and religion of the major character are portrayed in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* and how societal perceptions and interactions in the novel reinforce racialized, gendered, and religious hierarchies within the narrative. Ultimately, it can contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities of representation and inequality women of color face in literature.

Critical Race Theory, which emphasizes the intersection of race, power, and systemic oppression provides a valuable framework for this study. Recognizing that people experience systemic inequality in connection with other forms of oppression

like sexism or homophobia, this approach provides a full understanding of the complex issues faced by marginalized communities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023, p. 51). Crenshaw's (1991) concept of Intersectionality is relevant as it demonstrates how marginalized identities experience overlapping systems of oppression. Critical Race Theory acknowledges that racial inequality cannot be understood in isolation but must be analyzed alongside other intersecting factors, such as gender and religious discrimination. Specifically, Critical Race Theory helps make sense of our social environments' ever-changing complexity and mutability (Gillborn, 2015, p. 283). The theoretical framework serves as a critical lens and is particularly suitable for analyzing Aboulela's *Minaret* because it offers a nuanced approach to understanding the major character's multilayered experiences of marginalization within literary discourse.

There are five previous studies the writer chose that relate to the issue. Some previous studies related to this study are in the form of articles. The previous studies use different theoretical frameworks but the same source of data as *Minaret* by Leila Aboulela. They are *Questioning and Subversion of some Stereotypical Assumptions about the Muslim Veil/ Hijab: A Study of the Novel Minaret by Leila Aboulela* (2018) by Pankhuri Aggarwal, *Muslim Arab Women: The Sense of In-betweenness in Leila Aboulela's Novel Minaret* (2020) by M.F Rouabhiah Salma, *Spiritual Quest and the Development of the Female Identity in Leila Aboulela's Minaret* (2020) by Manal Haouala and Nessrine Bechiche, *Islamic Feminism And Concept Of Hijab: A Study Of Leila Aboulela's Minaret* (2022) by Ashraf Ibrahim Muhamed Zidan, and the last previous study is *Depiction of Exile as dispossession in Leila Aboulela's Minaret* (2023) by Kyomuhendo Sarah. Unlike the previous studies on Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* that predominantly focused on themes of hijab, identity formation, spiritual quest, and exile through literary criticism, Islamic feminism, or even feminist perspectives, this study distinctively employs Critical Race Theory to provide a comprehensive analysis of the intersection of race, gender, and religion of women of color.

This study provides a substantial gap in analyzing *Minaret* by Leila Aboulela through the Critical Race Theory, focusing on how the intersecting systems of race, gender, and religion in *Minaret* construct the marginalization and agency of the major character, Najwa, and examining how societal perceptions and interactions in *Minaret* reinforce racialized, gendered, and religious hierarchies within the narrative. None of the previous studies explicitly addresses the intersections of race, gender, and religion and how they shape and impact the major character as a Muslim woman of color's choices and lives within the narrative. The novelty lies in its application of Critical Race Theory to examine the intersection of race, gender, and religion in the novel. By doing so, this study provides a fresh perspective on Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*, revealing new insights into the complexities of marginalization faced by women of color and contributing to the broader discourse on race, gender, and systemic discrimination in literature.

## **1.2 Research Questions**

The following research questions examine in how race, gender, and religion are depicted toward the major character, Najwa, in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*:

1. How do the intersecting systems of race, gender, and religion in *Minaret* shape the marginalization and agency of the major character, Najwa?
2. How do societal perceptions and interactions in the novel reinforce racialized, gendered, and religious hierarchies?

## **1.3 Objective of The Study**

1. To examine how the intersecting systems of race, gender, and religion in *Minaret* construct the marginalization and agency of the major character, Najwa.
2. To examine how societal perceptions and interactions in *Minaret* reinforce racialized, gendered, and religious hierarchies within the narrative.

### 1.4 Significance of The Study

This study is important since it adds both theory and practice. The study *theoretically* contributes to critical conversations in postcolonial literary studies, intersectionality, and race theory by providing a nuanced approach demonstrating how Critical Race Theory can effectively analyze contemporary fiction, bridging gaps between literary analysis, critical race studies, and gender studies. *Practically*, the study sheds light on the lived realities of women of color, particularly Muslim women traversing complicated social environments, by scrutinizing how literary narratives expose and challenge systematic portrayals of oppressed identities. The study adds to larger social discussions about representation, identity, and systemic discrimination, providing valuable perspectives for scholars, educators, and practitioners in cultural studies, gender studies, and social justice, ultimately illuminating the profound ways literature can challenge deeply ingrained social stereotypes and promote more empathetic understanding of marginalized experiences.

### 1.5 Scope and Limitation of The Study

The scope of this study focuses specifically on analyzing the intersection of race, gender, and religion in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* through the theoretical lens of Critical Race Theory. This study primarily examines the narrative representation of the major character Najwa, exploring how her experiences reflect and challenge systemic representations of women of color. This study is limited to a textual analysis of the novel *Minaret* published in 2005, utilizing Critical Race Theory as the primary theoretical framework. This study does not extend to comparative analyses with other works by Aboulela or other authors, nor does it include empirical research or fieldwork. The limitations include the inherent subjectivity of literary interpretation and the novel's specific contextual boundaries, which primarily center on the experiences of a Sudanese Muslim woman in London. Furthermore, the study does not provide a comprehensive historical or sociological examination outside the textual representations within the novel, maintaining a focused literary critical approach.