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## “Identity Erasure in Fadia Faqir’s Pillars of Salt, My Name is Salma & Leila Aboulela’s Minaret”

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### ABSTRACT

This article aims to highlight the desire for identity erasure as a dominant theme in Fadia Faqir’s Pillars of Salt, My Name is Salma & Leila Aboulela’s Minaret. It also examines the process of rethinking and reshaping identity, its concomitant process of labelling and the desire for identity erasure in the target novels using insights from Postcolonial Theory, Freudian Psychoanalysis, Jungian Archetypal Criticism, and Derrida’s Deconstruction. Textual analysis reveals that Faqir and Aboulela aim to highlight the predicament of females in Arab societies and in England where they suffer from patriarchy, alienation, trauma and PTSD that cause them to wish to erase their past and their identities and to develop thanatos to escape the existential situations they find themselves in, and in which they suffer from patriarchy, traumatic loss of/separation from their loved ones, and sometimes a loss of virginity and, hence, a sinful past. Patriarchy, as in oppressive ideology, has a destructive effect upon female experience and female identity. In a world in which patriarchy still dominates, the novels in question function as an eye-opener on the need to empower women and free them from its tenacious grip.

**Keywords:** Identity, erasure, labelling, trauma, patriarchy, Anglo-Arab female fiction.

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### 1. Introduction

Fadia Faqir’s novels, Pillars of Salt and My Name is Salma and Leila Aboulela’s Minaret have generated a considerable number of critical essays due to the growing interest in diasporic Anglo-Arab women writers. These novels depict painful traumatic journeys that female protagonists go through in patriarchal existential (native/host) contexts that cause them to wish to erase their limiting/suffocating identities that clash with individual happiness. Faqir and Aboulela reveal the challenges that Arab females suffer from because of patriarchy. Their female characters are sadly trapped in traumatic existential contexts that cause them to be alone, traumatized and alienated while troubled by a

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haunting past. In fact, identity erasure is a dominant theme that permeates the target novels and is examined using insights from Postcolonial Theory, Freudian Psychoanalysis, Jungian Archetypal Criticism, and Derrida's Deconstruction.

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, the existing scholarship overlooks the desire for identity erasure theme and focuses on patriarchal oppression, postcolonial discourse, or identity crisis. Jones, for instance, regards POS as a representation of "the voices of modern women who undergo the oppression of patriarchal societies" (Jones 2013, 39). Similarly, El Bweitel concludes that the woman in POS "suffers from oppression and subjugation practiced by male hegemony which is supported by the cultural norms" (El Bweitel 2015, VII). In contrast, Yousef discusses POS from a postcolonial perspective focusing on "the subaltern, Anglo-Jordanian ties, language, otherness, and identity" (Yousef 2016, 373).

As for Faqir's MNIS, Onyango examines "identity formation, 'Otherness', the colonial predicament and the sense of alienation of the character in the diaspora" (Onyango 2016, V). Likewise, El Miniawi claims Salma's double identities are "governed by different cultural, linguistic, and religious codes" (El-Miniawi 2016, 33). Further, Zubair explores "identity formation amid the complex interplay of Arabness, Islam and feminism in a postcolonial context" (Zubair 2019, 118). Furthermore, Aziz highlights the "gap of racism and inferiority of East to the West" (Aziz 2018, 1). In contrast, Awajan et al. highlight the depiction of "Westerners ... in both favorable and unfavorable ways" in MNIS (Awajan 2018, 203). In addition, Adam generates "a theorisation of migration" and analyzes "melancholia as both a personal and socio-political collective experience" (Adam 2017, 2). Moreover, Felemban reveals that "Faqir has appropriated and reconstituted the English language ... to construct and express [Salma's] identity" (Felemban 2011, 44).

In Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*, Mazloun highlights "the complex representation of Muslim women characters" and analyzes "the processes of transformation of the female protagonists in a metropolitan context" (Mazloun 2015, 546). Morey examines it "as an example of a postsecular text" (Morey 2017, 301). In contrast, the following critics focus on the "veil" as a theme in *Minaret*: Stanecka, for instance, observes "veiling" and "the dislocation and loneliness of a young Sudanese woman in a big city" (Stanecka 2018, 76). Likewise, Al-Karawi and Bahar argue that "the veil is a trope for the contrasts of struggle and comfort, ambivalence and surety of self experienced by Muslim women" (Al-Karawai 2014, 255). Santesso, similarly, investigates *Minaret* with an eye on "the Muslim woman who willingly adopts hijab ... while remaining opposed to patriarchal and colonial oppression" (Santesso 2013, 84).

In light of the aforementioned review of literature, this article is, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, the first to focus on the desire for identity erasure in the target novels and probably the first to compare them thus contributing to the understanding of Anglo Arab women writers' fiction. Textual analysis reveals that Faqir and Aboulela aim to highlight the predicament of females in Arab societies and in England where they suffer from patriarchy, alienation, trauma and PTSD that cause them to wish to erase their past and their identities and to develop thanatos to escape the existential situations they find themselves in, and in which they suffer from patriarchy, traumatic loss of/separation from their loved ones, and sometimes a loss of virginity and, hence, a sinful past.

As for the methodology, the researcher employs Postcolonial Theory, Freudian Psychoanalysis, Jungian Archetypal Criticism, and Derrida's Deconstruction eclectically in the analysis of the target novels. The article begins by discussing 'identity erasure' as a theme and the preoccupation with identity in Fadia Faqir's *Pillars of Salt*, moves to discuss this theme in Fadia Faqir's *My Name is Salma* and then in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*.

## 2. Fadia Faqir's Pillars of Salt

Faqir's POS narrates the story of Maha, a Jordanian Bedouin woman, and Haniyyeh or Um Saad, a Syrian immigrant. Both women share a room in Fuhais Mental Hospital in Jordan. Maha's story has to suspend that of Um Saad to continue and vice versa. In Derridian terms, their stories are in a state of 'differance' since the presence of one means the absence of the other. They leak into each other, destabilising the first-text/second-text binary by removing the slash (/) in between thus creating a 'triple' existence. Simultaneously, the second version of Maha's story that is presented by the storyteller, Sami al-Adjnabi, generates another 'triple' existence that is brought to life by the merging of both versions of Maha's two contrasted stories.

In POS, the narrator as an authoritative presence and ‘centre’ of signification is absent since we have three different narrators who lose their reliability and credibility either because of the fusion of fantasy with reality as in the 1001 Nights’ style of Sami al-Adjnabi, or because they are ‘officially’ considered mentally insane as in the case of Maha and Haniyyeh. Hence they are in Culler’s words “deprived” as selves of their “status as source and master of meaning” (Culler 1981, 33). In addition, to Maha, “Life is a long dream”. She explains, “[p]eople are fed dreams, stuffed with dreams” (POS, 223). This loss of a ‘transcendental signified’ coupled with the removal of the slash between dream/reality, sanity/madness, truth/fiction allow the ‘play’ of the ‘centre’.

Both Maha and Um Saad wish to ‘erase’ their identities to escape the traumatic situation they face. Trauma is defined as “any disturbing experience that results in significant fear, helplessness, dissociation, confusion, or other disruptive feelings intense enough to have a long-lasting negative effect on a person’s attitudes, behavior, and other aspects of functioning” (APA Dictionary of Psychology). Pederson asserts that “trauma is an experience so intensely painful that the mind is unable to process it normally” (Pederson 2014, 334). Both Maha and Um Saad are subjected to physical violence, intimidated and brutalized to force them into submission and compliance. They end up entrapped in the mental asylum after being traumatized by their families and society, and their identities deny them from being united with the persons they love.

Um Saad, for instance, is beaten with her father’s “leather-belt” and experiences the painful “cold and sharp” buckle because she “lift up the shutter”. She dreams of “the Vanishing Cap” hoping “to be invisible like ether ... to slip into another identity” and to “cast off” her “identity like dirty underwear” (POS, 80). Her current identity limits/stops her from being with her lover, Muhammad the Circassian. Being invisible like “ether” is a form of erasure as it erases one’s identity as well as shape and form. Further, Um Saad invokes al-Shater Hasan to help her “disappear” using his “Vanishing Cap” (POS, 222). This invocation expresses Um Saad’s innocent child-like nature which yearns for a different reality in which dreams can materialize like having an attractive body and a different identity.

After her father turns down her lover Muhammad who asked for her hand in marriage, Um Saad wishes to “[r]oll into oblivion ... into another identity” (POS, 101). Clearly, “oblivion” is a total form of erasure of the past with its traumas, and having another identity equals an erasure of her current one. Thus, she yearns to acquire “another beautiful body and another identity” (POS,151) and wishes to “get rid of [her] skin ... head ... past” (POS, 220). Her head and her past only hold traumatic painful memories, and hence, she desires to erase them.

Indeed, Um Saad experiences many painful traumatic experiences: the loss of her lover (POS, 101), the physical punishment caused by her father (POS, 80, 108), being forced to marry the gross butcher (POS, 109), being reduced to a servant in her own house who sleeps in the kitchen because the butcher marries a second wife that occupies her bedroom (POS, 178), being severely beaten by her husband for protesting making breakfast for the new wife (POS, 179), and being betrayed by her own sons who befriend the butcher’s new wife (POS, 185). These physical and emotional traumas have a long-lasting effect and collaborate to drive Um Saad to the verge of madness and force her to run away.

During her short time of freedom, she feels she has “slipped out of [her] skin and rolled into another identity” thus becoming Hind Roustom “dancing” (POS, 187). She imagines the rice from her lover’s store “floating in the air” and “forming a cloud ... around the minaret” and feels “light, happy, and free” and thus, enjoys her “first deep sleep in months” (POS,188) since she escapes from that suffocating environment. The white colour of rice suggests “purity, innocence” (Guerin 1979, 185) in this positive context. Hence, it reflects Um Saad’s innocent child-like nature and pure love for Muhammad. The cloud of rice symbolizes the heavenly approval of the spiritual connection between Um Saad and Muhammad thus suggesting that love (though outside wedlock) has more spiritual power and heavenly approval than forced marriage. Further, to Freud, “dancing” connotes “sexual pleasure” (Guerin 1979, 159) thus reflecting Um Saad’s sexual desires for her lover. Um Saad is later found in “the Big Mosque’s yard” and sent to the mental asylum where no one visits her (POS, 188). These are sufficient reasons to traumatize her and make her feel helpless, scared, abandoned, and desiring to erase her past, memory, and identity. Hence, she wonders, “[w]ho wants to remember the past?” (POS, 122)

The second main character in POS who has her share of misfortune and trauma is Maha. When Um Saad expresses her desire to erase her past and her identity, Maha wonders: “What is identity[?] I think I have none” (POS, 80). Her efforts at asserting her identity in a patriarchal context prove nugatory, as if she is doomed to never leave a trace. For instance, she protests, “[t]he wind erased [her] footsteps and even Shamam, the best tracker of Arabia, would never find [her]” (POS, 91). In addition, when she returns to her husband Harb’s house, she discovers that “the henna and radishes beds” are now “an empty piece of land with no traces of footsteps” (POS, 119, *my italics*). Her efforts in planting and taking care of the radishes and henna for two years, like her footsteps, are all erased.

Further, Maha’s grandmother Sabha “spun the first thread” of a carpet, and Maha’s mother “hadn’t been able to finish weaving it”, and asks Maha to “complete” it. Though Maha does her best to finish it, she eventually realizes that “[t]he Carpet would never be finished” (POS, 15). The carpet is symbolic of the same fate that entraps all women in the village of Hamia – as evident when “Halimeh and Hamda were dancing on the unfinished rug” (POS, 200). The threads of the carpet are, in effect, the threads of fate. Maha explains: “Fine threads in my lap, threads across the horizon, a net which landed on top of the Jordan Valley” (POS, 15) thus linking fate to carpet threads.

Maha, as a female artist, is supposed to reflect her identity into the carpet she is weaving. However, she just “let the brown and cream threads find their own pattern. The rough texture had funny shapes on it like flying sand dunes” (POS, 106, *my italics*). Hall & du Guy explain that the desert is a “virgin land ... whose name and identity is not-yet” (Hall 1997, 3). Maha’s identity, like the desert’s, is without fixed contours or shapes. Further, Maha’s sand dunes are “flying” thus reflecting how quickly they change shape and the seeming impossibility of them assuming a fixed one.

Maha’s fate only harbors a sequence of traumatic experiences. She is beaten several times by her brother Daffash as, for instance, when she refuses to “[s]tamp the paper” of the land property to transfer its title to him (POS, 202); he “kicked” her, and “[h]is soiled boot had left its mark on [her] belly” (POS, 203). Hobbs and Rice claim that “[i]n return for all the goodies men receive from patriarchy, they are required to dominate women, to exploit and oppress” them “using violence if they must to keep patriarchy intact” (Hobbs 2018, 17). Daffash acts as a typical patriarchal male who oppresses Maha and uses violence against her to maintain his superiority and repress her identity.

Maha’s journey of pregnancy is physically and emotionally traumatic. Hulala, the tribe’s spiritual healer, cauterizes her with a “blazing iron bar” (POS, 92). She also suffers the traumatic loss of her beloved husband, Harb, who is killed in a bombing raid on Arab Bedouin rebels by the British “metal eagles” (POS, 162). “Harb’s body was sliced in two halves ... Nothing was left of his right leg. Flies licked frenziedly at his bright brown eyes” (POS, 160-161). This memory haunts Maha and makes her refuse to cook for the English (POS, 161). She “wrenched the metal eagle off the chest of an elderly man, threw it on the ground and stamped on it.” Then she “spat on the surprised face of the English officer” (POS, 162). She is a colonized who refuses to succumb to colonizers, and hence, is quite different from her brother Daffash who aims to win their “approval and acceptance” (POS, 41). Consequently, Daffash punishes Maha severely: “With his master’s boot he kicked [her] in the face”. He beats her “all over [her] body” to the extent that “[t]wo of [her] teeth were lying on the floor” and beats her with his “ammunition belt” which “flayed [her] skin” until she faints (POS, 164).

With such a history of brutality, trauma and suffering, a wish for an erasure of identity and of the past seems inevitable. Maha wishes that “the English doctor would wipe out all [her] memories with a piece of white cotton” (POS, 131). Unfortunately, the English doctor is only interested in silencing both her and Um Saad and keeps asking them to “Shut up” (POS, 188). According to Solnit, “[b]eing unable to tell your story is a living death.... sometimes a literal one” (Solnit 2017). The English doctor who stands simultaneously for both patriarchy and colonization symbolically erases and represses the female identity of Maha and Um Saad by “clipping” their “hair” & “leaving the skull bare” (POS, 208). Maha and Um Saad have been imprisoned by the patriarchal culture they live in and are finally deemed insane and locked up in Fuhais Mental Hospital only to experience more domination, repression and silencing by the English doctor.



### 3. Fadia Faqir’s My Name is Salma

Faqir’s MNIS also depicts the desire for erasure. The novel presents the story of Salma, a shepherdess from a Jordanian village called Hima. Salma has sexual intercourse outside wedlock with her lover, Hamdan, (MNIS, 36) who abandons her after knowing she is “pregnant” (MNIS, 203). She is sent to prison to protect her from being killed by her family where she is helped by Minister Mahoney and Miss Asher. Miss Asher adopts her (MNIS, 98) and helps her immigrate to Britain. There, she gets married to an Englishman (MNIS, 54) and gives birth to baby boy Imran (MNIS, 304). Nevertheless, she cannot get over her past and keeps thinking about her daughter, Layla, whom she gives birth to while imprisoned in Jordan and who is immediately taken away from her (MNIS, 47).

Salma is haunted by her traumatic and sinful past and wishes to erase it. To Rodriguez, guilt is “a cognitive and emotional response often associated with the grief experience in which a person feels a sense of remorse, responsibility, and/or shame regarding the loss” (Rodriguez 2001, 341). Salma’s loss of her virginity and the social scandal that follows burdens her with grief, and remorse. For a teenager whose lover has taken advantage of, Salma suffers severely; she confesses, “[t]hey stripped me of everything: my dignity, my heart, my flesh and blood” (MNIS, 95). How can she forget about losing her honour by Hamdan and being abandoned by him? About losing her baby daughter Layla, her “flesh and blood”, in prison? She wonders, “[w]as it possible to walk out of my skin, my past, my name ... to open a new page...?” (MNIS, 42). Evidently, Salma wishes to erase her “skin”, her “name” and her “past” i.e. her identity.

The past, however, is not easy to erase. Through association, a past memory is triggered. “Suddenly the aroma of freshly ground coffee, the smell of ripe olives and the scent of white orange blossom filled the bathroom”, and Salma imagines herself “sitting under the fig tree with [her] mother drinking mint tea” (MNIS, 57). Wells claims, “landscapes – actual, remembered or idealized – feed our sense of belonging to whatever place, region or nation that we view as homeland”, and it “contributes to our sense of security” (Wells 2011, 54). Hence, Salma’s memories about home reflect her yearning for both her mother and home country which give her a sense of belonging and security.

Further, Salma keeps thinking of her lover; “Hamdan suddenly emerged out of a dust cloud” (MNIS, 55) and she holds on to her “mother’s black shawl” (MNIS, 251), which gives her a false sense of being under the protective wing of her mother while simultaneously functioning as a symbol of her refusal to get rid of the past though it triggers her fears. The shawl’s black colour is an archetypal symbol of “evil; melancholy” (Guerin 1979, 185) and is thus symbolic of her sad and evil past that triggers her fears. She keeps, for instance, imagining her brother’s dark shadow, as an assassin, waiting for the right moment to shoot her between the eyes; “a dark figure lurking among the trees, wounded, his honour compromised ... his rifle aimed at [her] ready to fire” (MNIS, 205). Derrida notes that “only by means of a series of words that are faulty” and which he “erased in passing, in measure, regularly” yet “leaving them to the force of their tracing, the wake of their tracement (tracement), the force (without force) of a trace that will have allowed passage for the other” was he “able to arrive at the end” of his “phrase” (Derrida 1991, 424). To Derrida, there are no complete erasures. The black shawl and the shadow of Maha’s brother are, in Derridian terms, “traces” and prove the impossibility of having complete erasures.

The fear of retribution, of being killed in the name of honor chains Salma and prevents her from moving ahead in her life thus developing thanatos, i.e. a death-wish. Her thanatos is evident when she “offered” a Rottweiler her head (MNIS, 96), and when she claims that she “would drink” a “small glass bottle ... full of snake venom ... at one go” (MNIS, 8). Death functions as an escape from her present reality, and death is the ultimate act of erasure.

Salma’s presence in a host alien context complicates matters for her. Her attempt at assimilation in London fails miserably because, to the doctor, there is “[t]oo much past ... and not enough future” (MNIS, 205). He advises her “to cut [her] ties with the past”, erase it, and move on with her life (MNIS, 17). Salma reflects, “[t]his country was right in resisting me; it was right in refusing to embrace me because something in me was resisting it, and would never belong to it” (MNIS, 170). Her indelible past will always make her “resist” feeling that she belongs in England.

The past will remain as a barrier that stops Salma from assimilation in London. Though she names her son Imran, an Arabic name that means “construction”, she remains unable to construct a

home there. Her daughter Layla serves as another reason for the failure of identity erasure and as an example of Derrida's 'trace'; Salma wonders, "How could I ignore Layla's cries ... her constant pleading? I stood ... with a twisted neck looking both ways: backwards and forwards" (MNIS, 313). In effect, Salma is torn between her past and her present. The painful feeling that she has deserted her daughter is tearing her apart.

Salma's need for identity erasure is also caused by her feelings of inferiority which are accentuated because she is in a foreign host context. She complains, "[p]eople look at me all time as if disease" (MNIS, 123) and protests that "[i]t was like a curse upon my head; it was my fate: my accent and the colour of my skin" (MNIS, 191). She becomes self-conscious of her alienation in England and of her skin colour. Hall claims that "because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies" (Hall 2005, 17). JanMohamed also highlights the "fixation on the savagery and evil of the native in order to justify imperial occupation, control and exploitation" (Mangan 2012, 9). Hence, Salma's black skin not only alienates her, but also labels her as evil. She confesses, "[m]y hair was dark, my hands were dark and I was capable of committing dark deeds" (MNIS, 51, my italics). Her skin colour and "big crooked nose" (MNIS, 57) are race markers that label her as an evil alien in England.

Salma's feelings of inferiority and insecurity regarding her body and femininity intensify her desire to erase her identity. Simone de Beauvoir maintains that a woman as an 'other' is "taught ... to please", and hence, "must make herself an object" and "renounce her autonomy" (Beauvoir 2009, 305). To "please", Salma knows that her current body is not good enough. She complains, "[m]y ugly dark nipples ... were one and a half centimetres long" (MNIS, 53). Hence, she insists on having her nipples "reduced, cut out" by the doctor (MNIS, 160). Salma's desire to cut off her nipples is a form of desire for erasure since she feels ugly, dark, insecure and inferior. Further, her desire to erase her identity is evident in her desire to "turn white" so "that [she] would disappear" (MNIS, 52). This equation between whiteness and fairness evidently reflects Salma's feelings of inferiority that nourishes her desire to erase her identity.

Hall explains that "only through the relation to the Other... 'identity' – can be constructed" (Hall 2005, 17, original italics). Hall's remark explains Salma's feelings as an 'other' of inferiority and insecurity about the size of her nipples, the colour of her skin, and her identity in contrast with those of white English women. Moreover, Memmi explains that "[t]he first ambition of the colonized is to become equal to that splendid model [of the coloniser] and to resemble him to the point of disappearing in him". The colonized, according to Memmi, "agrees to destroy himself" by hiding "his past, his traditions, in fact all his origins which have become ignominious" (Memmi 1974, 119-122). Salma is culturally and intellectually colonized by the British and wishes to "disappear" in them. Indeed, Salma confesses, "I changed my name, address, past and even changed countries to erase my footsteps" (MNIS, my italics, 249). She does not want to be traced and is afraid of her past that is only holding promises of vengeance and death, and hence, her desire for identity erasure is articulated here.

Indeed, the desire for identity erasure permeates the novel. Salma maintains that "the city belonged to ... those who were ... trying to blot out their history" (MNIS, 28, my italics). She also explains her need to erase her identity when she emphatically declares that her "broad Bedouin Arabic had to be hidden over there at the end of the horizon" (MNIS, 23). Salma further desires to "slip slowly out of [her] body like a snake shedding her old skin." This way, she "might ... become someone else, who never had a bite of the forbidden apple" (MNIS, 59). Eating the "forbidden apple", her sin with Hamdan, makes her wish to undergo surgery to erase her memory. She wonders, "[w]hat if I turned white like milk .... Puff, my sinful past would disappear, a surgeon would slice away part of my mind" (MNIS, 108). Salma wants to erase her "sinful past", i.e. her memory by removing a part of her brain in addition to her skin colour to "turn white" and escape alienation. She admits, "I was so angry with myself for being so foreign so I stabbed the carton with a knife spilling the milk all over the worktop" (MNIS, 49). Salma's need for erasure is explicit. The whiteness of the milk reflects her desire to be white to escape being labeled as a foreigner. The violent act of stabbing the carton reflects her frustration at materializing her wish.

Salma's wishes to undo her sin with Hamdan which has caused her to suffer a life in exile, a tormenting haunting traumatic past as well as alienation and abandonment. White explains that

“amongst all the literature of migration the highest proportion deals in some way with ideas of return, whether actualized or remaining imaginary.” In Salma’s case, the return remains “imaginary” urging her to return until it is “actualized”. White argues that “[t]o return may be ... to seek but also to lose” (White 1995, 14). Indeed, Salma’s return aims to “seek” her daughter but makes her “lose” her life; she returns to her village only to discover that Layla’s ... uncle threw her in the Long Well” (MNIS, 325). Salma gets shot by her brother Mahmoud between her eyes while crying over her daughter’s grave in the name of redeeming his honour which Salma has stained (MNIS, 327) thus putting an end to her traumatized life.

#### 4. Leila Aboulela’s Minaret

Leila Aboulela’s *Minaret* is mainly concerned with the story of Najwa, a Sudanese girl from an upper class family. Her father, an important official in the government, provides for his family a happy secure luxurious westernized way of life until a military coup happens. Her father is arrested and executed on charges of “embezzle [ment]” (Minaret, 95) and “corruption” (Minaret, 58), whereas the family escapes to London where they live in exile. Following the death of her mother, Omar, her brother, becomes a drug addict and is sentenced to “fifteen years” in prison for attacking and nearly killing a police officer (Minaret, 127). Najwa is forced to work as a servant for her aunt and then as a baby sitter. Alone, she struggles to cover her expenses as the “new government” in Sudan “freezes [es]” her “father’s assets” (Minaret, 125).

The novel is preoccupied with the desire for erasure as a theme. Najwa’s need for being forgiven for her sinful past, for instance, reflects her desire for erasure as evident in the following analogy: “Our sins are a lump of clay clenched between the beak of a pigeon. The pigeon is perched on the branch of a tree at the edge of that ocean. It only has to open its beak” (Minaret, 4). If the pigeon opens its beak then sins will fall into the ocean, and a person will be absolved of his/her sins. Najwa feels sin-stained because of her sexual relationship with Anwar outside wedlock.

Anwar is a communist whom Najwa has fallen in love with back in Khatoum University in Sudan and meets again in London. He informs her that her brain has been conditioned to think she did something wrong; “[I]ike every other Arab girl,” he said, “You’ve been brainwashed about the importance of virginity.” In a westernized society the case would be different; he wonders, “how many twenty-five-year-old girls in London are virgins?” Najwa feels better temporarily since she is “in the majority now” and “a true Londoner” (Minaret, 176). Patriarchy is “an ideological and psychological structure”. It is “a consequence of the ideas that were current about women and men, and actual men’s and women’s internalization of these ideas” (Alsop 2002, 72). Najwa has “internalized” the ideas about the significance of virginity as Anwar suggests, and psychologically, her super-ego makes her feel guilty. Further, Burke and Stets claim that people under certain circumstances make “decisions ... on the basis of self-interest, fear, love, cowardice, or some combination of these other motives” (Burke 2009, 6). Najwa’s need to feel loved and her fear of being alone make her lose her virginity. This need is manifest, as discussed later, in the several dreams she has of being in her parents’ bedroom and of being assured that they love her.

Clearly, Najwa wishes to erase her identity as Sudanese and to embrace the western British identity which provides her with stability and freedom to do anything she wants without being criticized by society. She wishes for a country like Britain, “[a] country we could leave at any time, return to at any time and it would be there for us, solid, waiting” (Minaret, 165), a country where nobody would “care what [Najwa and Anwar] were doing”, and there, they would be “free” (Minaret, 165). Nevertheless, Najwa feels threatened if someone knows who she is. She confesses, “[h]ow many times have I lied and said I am Eritrean or Somali?” (Minaret, 71). To Mercer, “identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty” (Mercer 1990, 43, *my italics*). Najwa’s exile, the traumatic experience of her father’s execution, make her identity “in crisis”, and hence, an “issue”. In effect, Najwa remains entrapped in Khartoum memories – an example of Derrida’s ‘trace’ – which accentuate her feelings of alienation in London. She asserts, “I circle back, I regress; the past doesn’t let go” (Minaret, 216).

In contrast, Anwar reflects on the freedom available in London. He notifies Najwa that “here no one knows our background, no one knows who’s daughter you are, no one knows my politics. We are both niggers, equals” (Minaret, 157, my italics). Sarup explains, “[p]eople attach certain labels to others, and labels often (but not always) begin to have an effect” (Sarup 1996, 14). Though the discourse of racism labels them as “niggers”, it simultaneously frees Anwar and Najwa from their identity as ‘Sudanese’. However, Najwa realizes that identity erasure is not easy as she is labeled because of her skin colour as an alien to the host British culture. She becomes “conscious of [her] shitty-coloured skin” in contrast with the English “placid paleness” (Minaret, 174). Her feelings of racial inferiority are, like Faqir’s Salma, evident.

Kathy Deliofsky claims that “idealized representations of white femininity occurred in distinct historical phases within the context of European colonialism/slavery and imperialism”, that they “portray white women as bathed and permeated by white light”, and that all women must look like them (Deliofsky 2008, 56-57). In addition, Lacan explains that “[w]e also become ourselves under the ‘gaze’ of the ‘Other’ or ‘great other’ (‘grande autre’)” (Bertens 2002, 161). Being in an English host culture intensifies Najwa’s feelings of inferiority which are also evident in her identification with the “caged foreign animals” she sees in the zoo and which “weighed [her] down” (Minaret, 196).

Najwa grows up in a family of Anglophiles. She goes to the “American club” (Minaret, 23) and watch “videos of Dallas” (Minaret, 31). Yet, she has always been affected by “the sound of Azan”. She explains, “the words and the way the words sounded went inside me” into “[a] hollow place. A darkness that would suck me in and finish me” (Minaret, 31). She thinks that “hollow place” is “where the longing for God was supposed to come from” (Minaret, 135). Migration as well as Najwa’s painful experiences in London intensify her religious feelings. Sadia Abbas states that “Islam provides comfort, community, and access to identity” (Abbas 2011, 445). Hence, having felt that she has lost her compass, Najwa turns to the mosque’s minaret, like a lost ship searching for a lighthouse through tumultuous seas.

Driven by a guilt complex because of her sexual intercourse with Anwar, Najwa breaks off her relationship with Anwar and starts “pray[ing] and wear[ing] hijab” (Minaret, 95), and attending “Qur’an Tajweed class at the mosque” (Minaret, 74). As a practicing Muslim, her super-ego becomes more active thus intensifying her guilt complex. She admits, “the guilt never ever went away. Now I wanted a wash, a purge, a restoration of innocence. I yearned to go back to being safe with God” (Minaret, 242). Najwa is looking for an erasure of this haunting sin-stained memory. The word ‘Pollution’ is derived “from the Latin ‘polluere’ meaning ‘to defile’, and its early English usage reflects ... moral contamination of a person” (Garrard 2007, 8). Najwa feels polluted because she has lost her virginity outside wedlock.

Najwa finds relief in the mosque where “no one knew [her] past” (Minaret, 239). It is as if her identity is erased in the mosque. She is just a Muslim girl, not Sudanese, coloured, poor or even an alien. Elbaz and Helly maintain that due to “mass migration and market globalization ... citizens have to rewrite and rethink their identities” (Elbaz & Helly 1995). Najwa has to “rewrite and rethink” her identity because of her forced migration to Britain and because of her experience in exile and this process seems to be endless/unfinished.

Hajj, a spiritual holy pilgrimage to Mecca, becomes a dream for Najwa that would fulfill her desire for erasure of her sins, her loss of innocence and her liberal westernized past in Khartoum. It would be the ultimate erasure of her sins. Najwa explains, “If my Hajj is accepted, I will come back without any sins and start my life again, fresh” (Minaret, 209). Najwa’s feeling of being contaminated by her sin with Anwar would go away because she would return pure and innocent if her Hajj – a death-and-rebirth experience – is accepted.

The novel ends with one of Najwa’s recurrent dreams –another example of Derrida’s trace– of her parents’ bedroom. This time, however, the dream comes with images of “decay” and “carpets threadbare and curtains torn.” Further, “[t]he ceiling has caved in, the floor is gutted and the crumbling walls are smeared with guilt” (Minaret, 276, my italics). Her sinful past, obviously, haunts her and ruins her imaginary shelter from harsh cruel reality, i.e. the beautiful rosy dream of her parents’ bedroom. The word “guilt” ends the novel suggestive of Najwa’s guilt-complex and the failure of erasure.



## 5. Conclusion

The theme of identity erasure permeates Faqir’s POS, MNIS and Aboulela’s Minaret. Faqir’s characters: Salma, Maha, Um Saad and Aboulela’s Najwa all suffer from a desire to erase their traumatic painful past and their identities to escape the existential situations they find themselves in, and in which they suffer from patriarchy, traumatic loss of/separation from their loved ones, and in Salma’s and Najwa’s cases a loss of virginity and, hence, a sinful past. The novels prove Spacks’ claim that “[w]omen writing ... demonstrate that the experience of women has long been the same, that female likenesses are more fundamental than female differences” (Spacks 1976, 5). The novels also prove Al-Maleh’s claims that the writings of diasporic Anglophone postcolonial Arab writers “mostly concerned themselves with the issue of psychological and social alienation” both “at home and abroad” (Al-Maleh 2009, 8) as in Maha and Um Saad’s case who suffer from psychological and social alienation at home, and in Salma’s and Najwa’s cases in which they suffer from the same issues both at home and in England. In these three novels, desire for erasure appears to be caused by a traumatic painful/sinful past, an inferiority caused by skin colour and physical appearance, and an existential context that promises no escape. Patriarchy, as in oppressive ideology, has a destructive effect upon female experience and female identity. In a world in which patriarchy still dominates, the novels in question function as an eye-opener on the need to empower women and free them from its tenacious grip.

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