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Islam in Everyday Life in Western Societies: Challenging Stereotypes through the Fiction of Leila Aboulela and Laila Halaby

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Abstract

The representation of Islam and Muslims in Western societies has frequently been shaped by stereotypes associating Muslim identities with extremism, violence, cultural incompatibility, and women's oppression. This study examines how contemporary fiction challenges these representations through the portrayal of Muslim everyday life in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* (1999) and Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007). Employing a qualitative comparative literary approach, the study analyses characterization, dialogue, narrative situations, and representations of everyday religious and social practices. The analysis draws on Edward Said's postcolonial critique of Orientalism and the perspective of lived religion to investigate how Muslim identities are represented and negotiated within Western societies. The findings reveal two complementary narrative strategies. Aboulela foregrounds Islamic faith, spiritual resilience, female agency, and intercultural dialogue through Sammar's experiences as a Sudanese Muslim woman in Scotland. In contrast, Halaby exposes the everyday mechanisms of Islamophobia, racialisation, institutional surveillance, and social exclusion through Jassim and Salwa's experiences in post-9/11 America. This study contributes to postcolonial literary scholarship by conceptualising fiction as a cultural counter-narrative that humanises Muslim characters and challenges reductive representations. It argues that everyday experiences of faith, work, family, and social interaction provide an important literary means of promoting intercultural understanding and recognising the complexity of Muslim identities.

Representasi Islam dan Muslim dalam masyarakat Barat kerap dibentuk oleh stereotip yang mengaitkan identitas Muslim dengan ekstremisme, kekerasan, ketidakcocokan budaya, dan penindasan terhadap perempuan. Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana karya sastra kontemporer menantang representasi tersebut melalui penggambaran kehidupan sehari-hari Muslim dalam novel The Translator (1999) karya Leila Aboulela dan Once in a Promised Land (2007) karya Laila Halaby. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif-komparatif dengan menganalisis karakterisasi, dialog, situasi naratif, serta representasi praktik keagamaan dan sosial sehari-hari. Analisis didasarkan pada kritik pascakolonial Edward Said terhadap orientalisme dan perspektif lived religion untuk memahami bagaimana identitas Muslim direpresentasikan dan dinegosiasikan dalam masyarakat Barat. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan dua strategi naratif yang saling melengkapi. Aboulela menonjolkan keimanan Islam, ketahanan spiritual, agensi

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perempuan, dan dialog antarbudaya melalui pengalaman Sammar sebagai perempuan Muslim Sudan di Skotlandia. Sebaliknya, Halaby mengungkap mekanisme Islamofobia dalam kehidupan sehari-hari, rasialisasi, pengawasan institusional, dan eksklusi sosial melalui pengalaman Jassim dan Salwa di Amerika Serikat pasca-9/11. Penelitian ini berkontribusi terhadap kajian sastra pascakolonial dengan mengonseptualisasikan fiksi sebagai narasi tandingan kultural yang memanusiakan tokoh Muslim dan menantang representasi yang reduktif. Pengalaman keseharian yang berkaitan dengan agama, pekerjaan, keluarga, dan interaksi sosial menjadi medium literer untuk membangun pemahaman lintas budaya dan mengakui kompleksitas identitas Muslim.

Keywords: *Islamophobia; Muslim everyday life; postcolonial literature; lived religion; Leila Aboulela; Laila Halaby.*

Introduction

The representation of Islam and Muslims in Western societies has long been shaped by historical, political, and cultural discourses that associate Muslim identities with terrorism, extremism, cultural backwardness, and women's oppression. These stereotypes are reinforced by political conflicts, security narratives, and media coverage, which often reduce the diversity of Muslim experiences to negative images. A meta-analysis of media representations demonstrates the persistent tendency to associate Islam and Muslims with violence and extremism (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017). This phenomenon can be understood through Orientalism, which explains how Western knowledge systems construct the East as culturally inferior and fundamentally different from the West (Said, 1978). Such representations became more pronounced after September 11, 2001, when Muslim identities were increasingly associated with security threats, racialisation, and contested national belonging (Aumeerally, 2017; Lau & Mendes, 2016). Consequently, examining Muslim experiences in Western societies requires attention not only to political and media discourse but also to everyday practices, cultural negotiations, and the ways Muslims construct their identities within diverse social environments.

Contemporary Muslim fiction offers an important space for challenging these dominant representations. Through postcolonial literary strategies, writers can articulate alternative narratives that foreground the complexity of Muslim identities and everyday religious experiences (Chambers & Hussain, 2023). In this context, Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005) and Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) provide significant examples. Aboulela explores how Islamic faith and religious practices shape the identity, agency, and sense of belonging of a Sudanese woman living in London (Morey, 2017), whereas Halaby examines how post-9/11 suspicion, racialisation, and cultural exclusion affect the everyday lives of an Arab couple in the United States (Lamghari, 2023; Valassopoulos, 2014). Although their narrative approaches differ, both writers challenge homogeneous representations of Muslims by portraying individuals negotiating religious convictions, personal aspirations, and cultural identities. Drawing on postcolonial theory and the perspective of lived

religion, this study examines how their fiction challenges stereotypes and reimagines Islam through everyday Muslim experiences in Western societies. It argues that their narratives offer more nuanced representations of Muslim life by foregrounding religious practices, personal relationships, cultural negotiation, and the struggle for belonging.

The representation of Islam and Muslims in Western societies has long been shaped by historical, political, and cultural discourses that associate Muslim identities with terrorism, extremism, cultural backwardness, and women's oppression. These representations are reproduced through political narratives, media coverage, and post-9/11 security discourses, often reducing the diversity of Muslim experiences to negative stereotypes (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017; Aumeerally, 2017; Lau & Mendes, 2016). Such constructions can be understood through Orientalism, which explains how Western knowledge systems produce hierarchical representations of the East as culturally inferior and fundamentally different from the West (Said, 1978, 1993). In the aftermath of September 11, these discourses intensified the racialisation of Muslim identities and complicated Muslims' experiences of citizenship, belonging, and everyday social interaction (Lamghari, 2023; Valassopoulos, 2014). Contemporary Muslim fiction consequently provides an important space for challenging Islamophobic assumptions through alternative representations of Muslim subjectivity, religious commitment, and cultural belonging (Chambers & Hussain, 2023; Gupta, 2025). This literary intervention is particularly significant because fiction can move beyond abstract political debates by presenting Muslims as complex individuals whose identities are shaped by ordinary experiences, personal relationships, religious practices, and social negotiations (McGuire, 2008; Ammerman, 2014).

The literary circulation and reception of Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005) and Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) demonstrate the visibility of Muslim-authored narratives within Western literary spaces. *Minaret* has received approximately 3,215 ratings and 418 reviews on Goodreads, alongside favourable critical responses from *The Guardian*, *Publishers Weekly*, *Kirkus Reviews*, and *The Independent* (Goodreads, 2007; Aboulela, 2005). Aboulela has also identified *Minaret* as the novel that reached a broader mainstream readership in the United Kingdom, although she notes that Muslim-themed fiction can still be perceived as culturally unfamiliar within the British literary marketplace (Ahmed, 2023). Meanwhile, *Once in a Promised Land* has received approximately 393 Goodreads ratings and 53 reviews and gained institutional recognition as a Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers selection and one of *The Washington Post*'s 100 best fiction books of 2007 (Goodreads, 2007; Halaby, n.d.). These indicators demonstrate the novels' circulation and reception among Western reading communities, although they do not constitute verified sales figures or direct evidence of measurable reductions in Islamophobia. Through different narrative approaches, Aboulela foregrounds

Islamic faith, spiritual transformation, and the everyday religious experiences of a Sudanese woman in London (Morey, 2017), whereas Halaby examines the consequences of post-9/11 suspicion, racialisation, and cultural exclusion through the experiences of an Arab couple in the United States (Lamghari, 2023; Valassopoulos, 2014). Drawing on postcolonial theory and the perspective of lived religion, this study compares how both novelists challenge stereotypical representations of Islam and Muslims by presenting religious practices, personal agency, cultural negotiation, and the struggle for belonging as integral dimensions of Muslim everyday life in Western societies (Chambers & Hussain, 2023; Gupta, 2025; McGuire, 2008). It argues that their fiction contributes to a more nuanced literary understanding of Islam and creates opportunities for intercultural dialogue, although its actual impact on readers' attitudes towards Muslims requires separate empirical investigation.

Accordingly, this study examines selected fiction by Leila Aboulela and Laila Halaby through postcolonial theory and an interdisciplinary approach informed by the perspective of lived religion. It investigates how their narratives challenge stereotypical representations of Islam and Muslims, how Muslim characters negotiate religious convictions and hyphenated identities within culturally diverse Western societies, and how everyday experiences become a literary means of articulating alternative Muslim subjectivities. This study argues that the fiction of Aboulela and Halaby reimagines Islam beyond dominant representations of violence, extremism, and cultural backwardness by presenting Muslim life through ordinary experiences, personal relationships, religious practices, and negotiations of belonging. Rather than treating the selected novels as comprehensive representations of all Muslim communities, this research approaches them as literary interventions that complicate dominant assumptions about Islam and Muslim identities. In doing so, it contributes to discussions of Islam in everyday life in Western societies and highlights the potential of contemporary Muslim fiction to foster intercultural dialogue, mutual recognition, and a more nuanced understanding of religious and cultural difference.

Method

This study employs a qualitative comparative literary approach to examine how Leila Aboulela and Laila Halaby challenge stereotypical representations of Islam and Muslims through the portrayal of everyday Muslim experiences in Western societies. The primary data consist of textual passages from Aboulela's *The Translator* (1999) and Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007), purposively selected because both novels explore Muslim identity, cultural negotiation, and social belonging in Western contexts. Data are collected through close reading and textual documentation, focusing on characterization, dialogue, narrative situations, and representations of everyday practices, including religious observance, interpersonal

relationships, professional activities, and encounters with social prejudice. This approach is informed by qualitative textual and discourse analysis, which enables the systematic interpretation of textual meanings, narrative structures, and ideological representations (Alejandro & Zhao, 2023). The comparative procedure involves contextual description, juxtaposition, and interpretation to identify both convergences and differences between the two literary works.

The analysis integrates Edward Said's (1978) critique of Orientalism with the perspective of lived religion (Ammerman, 2014; McGuire, 2008). Postcolonial theory is employed to examine how cultural binaries, racialised representations, and constructions of Muslims as the Other are reproduced or contested in the novels. The lived religion perspective, meanwhile, provides an analytical lens for investigating how religious identity is expressed through everyday practices, personal relationships, and individual experiences. Recent scholarship on Muslim literary narratives, post-9/11 racialisation, and the literary representation of Islamophobia further informs the interpretation of the texts (Chambers & Hussain, 2023; Kamal, 2023; Lamghari, 2023; Gupta, 2025). A comparative analysis is subsequently conducted to identify Aboulela's emphasis on religious faith, spiritual resilience, and intercultural dialogue, alongside Halaby's representation of racialisation, institutional discrimination, and the negotiation of Arab-Muslim identity. The findings are interpreted to explain how fiction can function as a cultural counter-narrative that challenges Islamophobic stereotypes and offers more nuanced understandings of Muslim everyday life.

Result and Discussion

Orientalisme, Representasi Islam, dan Konstruksi Otherness

In *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said argues that Western discourse has historically represented the East as exotic, irrational, backward, and oppressed. Such representations are not merely descriptions of cultural differences; rather, they constitute systems of knowledge closely intertwined with relations of power. Through these representational mechanisms, the West positions itself as the centre of rationality and progress, while the East is constructed as an inferior cultural Other. Said's critique of Orientalism remains particularly relevant to contemporary studies of Arab and Muslim representation in Western media and literature. For instance, Shaheen (2001) demonstrates how Hollywood cinema repeatedly reproduces negative stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims by depicting them as violent, fanatical, terrorist, or threatening to Western civilisation. More recent scholarship further illustrates how these representational patterns intersect with racialisation and institutionalised forms of Islamophobia.

Kozaric (2024), for example, highlights how Muslim experiences of social exclusion in Western societies are shaped by discrimination, racialisation, and stigmatisation. Similarly, Kumar (2024) identifies the marginalisation of anti-Muslim

racism within communication and media scholarship, emphasising the need to take Muslim racialisation seriously as a dimension of contemporary racial politics. These perspectives suggest that the representation of Islam and Muslims cannot be separated from the historical production of colonial knowledge and the discursive practices through which Western perceptions of the Muslim world are constructed.

Said challenges such reductive representations by emphasising the importance of intercultural relationships grounded in dialogue, exchange, and shared human experiences. Rather than interpreting relations between civilisations exclusively through narratives of conflict, his humanistic perspective encourages recognition of their interconnected histories and cultural interactions (Said, 2004). This perspective provides a theoretical foundation for understanding literature as a space of cultural negotiation and resistance to hegemonic representations. Literature does not merely reproduce dominant images of particular communities; it can also articulate alternative experiences from groups that have historically been positioned as objects of representation. In this context, the fiction of Leila Aboulela and Laila Halaby can be understood as a form of *writing back* against Western discourses that homogenise and simplify Arab and Muslim identities. By portraying ordinary characters through their personal experiences, emotional struggles, religious convictions, and complex cultural affiliations, both writers reposition Muslims as subjects with their own voices and agency.

Recent literary scholarship reinforces this interpretation. Chambers and Hussain (2023) demonstrate how contemporary genre fiction can reproduce or contest stereotypical representations of Muslim identities, while Taşyakan (2024), through an analysis of Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*, shows how Arab-American fiction challenges the Orientalist binaries underlying post-9/11 political discourse and exposes their consequences for American society. Similarly, Gupta (2025) argues that contemporary post-9/11 fiction challenges reductive classifications of Muslims as "good," "bad," or "moderate" by foregrounding the diversity of everyday Islamic experiences. These studies highlight the potential of literature to challenge essentialist representations and articulate more complex understandings of Muslim subjectivity and cultural belonging.

Leila Aboulela: Islam, Identity, and Diasporic Life

Leila Aboulela is a Sudanese writer widely recognised for her fiction exploring the intersections of Islam, migration, identity, and Muslim diasporic experiences in Western societies. Her literary works are frequently associated with the term *halal fiction*, a critical category used to describe literary narratives that incorporate Islamic values, experiences, and perspectives into contemporary fiction (Ghazoul, 2001). In Aboulela's fiction, religion is not merely a formal identity marker or cultural backdrop; rather, it constitutes an integral dimension of everyday experience, shaping personal decisions, social relationships, and the ways in which characters

interpret their lives. Her narratives also explore Muslim women's experiences, multiculturalism, transnationalism, migration, and identity formation. Through this approach, Aboulela presents Muslim experiences that cannot be reduced to a simplistic opposition between Islamic tradition and Western modernity.

Recent scholarship further demonstrates the significance of her literary approach. Zulfiqar (2024), for example, argues that *Minaret* challenges stereotypical representations of African Muslim women by drawing on Islamic and Sufi traditions and offering an alternative to monolithic Western understandings of Islam. Similarly, Roshan and Al Tamimi (2025) examine how Muslim women's diasporic identities are constructed through religious, cultural, and social negotiations in *Minaret*. These studies highlight Aboulela's contribution to contemporary literature by positioning Islamic faith as an active source of identity formation, personal meaning, and cultural negotiation rather than as an obstacle to integration into Western society.

Aboulela was born in Cairo, Egypt, in 1964, to an Egyptian mother and a Sudanese father. She moved to Sudan shortly after her birth and grew up in Khartoum, where she completed her early education. She subsequently earned a degree in Economics, specialising in Statistics, from the University of Khartoum and pursued postgraduate studies in Statistics at the London School of Economics. In 1990, she moved to Aberdeen, Scotland, with her husband and children. Her migration experience and subsequent encounter with a different cultural and religious environment became important influences on her literary development. As Aboulela has explained, her move from Khartoum to Aberdeen inspired her to write about the unfamiliarity of her new surroundings and to introduce readers to Sudan and Islam through fiction (Aboulela, 2024). Her major literary works include *The Translator* (1999), *Minaret* (2005), *Lyrics Alley* (2010), *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015), *Elsewhere, Home* (2018), *Bird Summons* (2019), and *River Spirit* (2023). Her short-story collection *Coloured Lights* (2001) includes “The Museum,” which won the inaugural Caine Prize for African Writing in 2000. In addition to novels and short stories, Aboulela has written radio plays, including *The Mystic Life* (2003) and *The Lion of Chechnya* (2005), which were broadcast by BBC Radio. Her literary achievements, international translations, and critical recognition demonstrate the circulation of her work within Anglophone literature and its significance to discussions of African literature, Muslim women's writing, and diasporic identity (Aboulela, n.d.; Motawy, 2023).

Within the context of this study, *Minaret* (2005) is particularly significant because it portrays the experiences of a Sudanese Muslim woman living in the diasporic environment of London. Through the protagonist, Najwa, Aboulela explores how social, economic, and personal transformations intersect with spiritual development and the rediscovery of religious identity. Islam is represented not as a symbol of backwardness or an obstacle to women's freedom, but as a source of meaning, moral orientation, and identity reconstruction. This representation

challenges secular assumptions that Muslim women's religious commitments necessarily indicate subordination or a lack of personal agency. Morey (2017), for instance, examines the relationship between Muslim identity, piety, and postsecular discourse in Aboulela's fiction, demonstrating the complexity of negotiating religious commitment within contemporary Western societies. More recent research by Abdul Majid (2025) further argues that Islamic devotion in *Minaret* can be understood as a form of freedom grounded in the protagonist's relationship with God, while Rosman (2025) examines Najwa's transformation from a relatively secular Muslim identity into a more consciously practising religious identity through self-discovery and Muslim sisterhood. Taken together, these studies demonstrate that Aboulela offers a nuanced representation of Muslim everyday life in which religious belief and practice constitute integral dimensions of women's identity, agency, and experiences of belonging.

Laila Halaby: Arab-American Identity and the Negotiation of Muslim Belonging in the West

Laila Halaby is an Arab-American writer known for her novels, poetry, and autobiographical works. She was born in Beirut, Lebanon, in 1966 to a Jordanian father and an American mother and grew up primarily in Arizona, United States. Her multicultural background has significantly informed the recurring themes in her literary works, particularly migration, transnationalism, intercultural encounters, identity formation, and the negotiation of belonging within multicultural societies. Halaby studied Italian and Arabic as an undergraduate and subsequently pursued postgraduate studies in Arabic literature and Near Eastern Languages and Culture at the University of California, Los Angeles, as well as counselling at Loyola Marymount University. Her educational background and cross-cultural experiences provide a distinctive perspective on Arab-American life, particularly the tensions between cultural identity, religious affiliation, and the social expectations surrounding integration (PEN/Faulkner Foundation, 2021; Halaby, n.d.). Her literary approach is particularly relevant to discussions of diasporic identity because it reveals how individuals negotiate multiple cultural affiliations without necessarily abandoning their inherited identities.

Halaby's literary works consistently explore questions of identity, alienation, and belonging among Arab-American individuals in Western societies. Her narratives examine the tensions between here and there, tradition and modernity, and the self and the Other. However, these oppositions are not necessarily presented as irreconcilable divisions. Instead, her characters demonstrate how identities are continuously shaped through negotiation, migration experiences, family relationships, and everyday social interactions. Her two prominent novels are *West of the Jordan* (2003), which received the PEN Beyond Margins Award in 2004, and *Once in a Promised Land* (2007), which was selected as a Barnes & Noble

Discover Great New Writers title and named one of *The Washington Post*'s 100 best works of fiction of 2007 (PEN/Faulkner Foundation, 2021; PEN America, 2016). Halaby has also published poetry and autobiographical works, including *My Name on His Tongue* (2012) and *The Weight of Ghosts* (2023). Across these different literary forms, she explores the complexities of cultural identity, personal memory, displacement, and the experience of being perceived as an outsider within dominant social environments (Halaby, n.d.; Red Hen Press, 2023).

Once in a Promised Land (2007) is particularly significant for examining the representation of Arab and Muslim identities in the post-9/11 context. Through Jassim and Salwa Haddad, a Jordanian couple living in the United States, Halaby illustrates how the political and social climate following the September 11 attacks transforms personal lives, social relationships, and experiences of belonging among Arab-American communities. The protagonists are not portrayed merely as representatives of Arab or Muslim identities; rather, they are individuals with professional responsibilities, marital relationships, personal aspirations, conflicts, and emotional vulnerabilities. Their experiences reveal how suspicion, racial prejudice, and religious stereotyping penetrate everyday interactions and shape individuals' relationships with their surrounding social environments. Valassopoulos (2014) demonstrates how the novel challenges essentialist understandings of Arab-American identity and explores the experience of *un-belonging* in post-9/11 America.

More recently, Lamghari (2023) examines the intersection of race, gender, religion, and class in the experiences of Jassim and Salwa, showing how neo-Orientalist discourses contribute to their racialisation and exclusion. Taşyakan (2024) further analyses the novel as a polyphonic literary response to the post-9/11 political agenda, arguing that its multiple narrative perspectives expose the limitations and harmful consequences of dominant political binaries. Similarly, Hilal (2020) highlights how Arab folk traditions and cultural memory in the novel challenge narratives that construct Arab and Muslim Americans as outsiders or potential threats. Through these narrative strategies, Halaby challenges the tendency to interpret Arab and Muslim identities exclusively through the categories of terrorism, political loyalty, or cultural difference. Instead, she foregrounds the heterogeneity of Arab-American experiences and the complex ways in which individuals negotiate identity, citizenship, and social recognition within Western society.

Literature, Everyday Life, and the Critique of Islamophobia

The literary works of Leila Aboulela and Laila Halaby share a commitment to portraying Muslim characters as complex human subjects with agency who navigate everyday life within Western societies. Nevertheless, the two writers employ different narrative approaches. Aboulela places greater emphasis on spiritual

experiences, religious practices, and the formation of identity through Islam, whereas Halaby focuses more extensively on diasporic experiences, racialisation, social prejudice, and the negotiation of belonging. These differences provide a productive comparative framework for understanding how Islam is experienced and represented in the everyday lives of Muslims in Western societies. The perspective of *lived religion* helps explain that religion operates not only through formal doctrines and institutions but also through everyday practices, interpersonal relationships, embodied experiences, and individuals' interpretations of their lives (Ammerman, 2014; McGuire, 2008). Recent research by McGinty (2023), for instance, demonstrates how lived Islam is embodied through everyday practices and identity negotiations among American Muslim women. Similarly, Naseef et al. (2024) show that representations of Muslim children's everyday lives can function as literary counter-narratives by integrating religious practices into ordinary family and community experiences. From this perspective, Islam in Aboulela's and Halaby's novels can be examined through how their characters practise their faith, establish social relationships, encounter discrimination, and negotiate their identities within multicultural environments.

Previous scholarship has examined the representation of Islam and Muslim identity in the literary works of both Aboulela and Halaby. Research on Aboulela has particularly emphasised the relationship between religious piety, diasporic identity, and postsecular discourse (Morey, 2017), while studies of Halaby have primarily focused on Arab-American identity, racialisation, and post-9/11 experiences (Lamghari, 2023; Valassopoulos, 2014). More recent scholarship has expanded these discussions. Al-Mohammedi et al. (2025), for example, examine how *The Translator* represents faith, cultural hybridity, and Arab-Muslim women's agency, arguing that religious commitment can constitute a framework for negotiating identity rather than an obstacle to cultural integration. Meanwhile, Lamghari (2023) demonstrates how race, gender, religion, and class intersect in shaping the experiences of Jassim and Salwa in *Once in a Promised Land*. Taşyakan (2024) further interprets Halaby's novel as a polyphonic literary critique of post-9/11 political narratives and their racialised binaries.

However, a systematic comparison of how these two writers represent Islam through the everyday experiences of Muslim characters remains a productive area for further investigation. This study addresses this gap by bringing postcolonial theory and the perspective of *lived religion* into dialogue to analyse the relationship between representation, identity, religious practices, and cultural negotiation. Rather than treating the two novels as comprehensive representations of all Muslim communities, the study examines how literary narratives construct alternative perspectives that challenge dominant stereotypes. Through the portrayal of personal experiences, social relationships, religious convictions, and struggles for recognition, Aboulela's and Halaby's works can be understood as literary

interventions into Islamophobic discourse and as spaces for articulating more diverse and humanising representations of Muslim life. This approach is consistent with Said's (2004) humanistic understanding of intellectual engagement as a form of resistance against injustice and dehumanisation. Within this framework, portraying Muslim characters as individuals with complex experiences, aspirations, and social relationships constitutes a narrative strategy for fostering intercultural understanding and challenging the dehumanisation of cultural and religious Others.

Discussion

Leila Aboulela's The Translator (1999): Islam, Identity, and Intercultural Dialogue

In *The Translator* (1999), Leila Aboulela challenges the tendency of Western literary discourse to represent Muslim identities primarily through cultural and political categories. Rather than portraying Islam as an external marker of ethnic identity, Aboulela presents religious faith as an internal dimension of personal experience that shapes emotions, moral decisions, and everyday practices. This narrative approach is consistent with her understanding of fiction as a medium for exploring the psychological and spiritual dimensions of Muslim life. As Aboulela explains, she is interested in representing "the psychology, the state of mind and the emotions of a person who has faith," rather than treating Muslim identity merely as a cultural or political category (Eissa, 2005). Consequently, Islam in the novel functions not simply as a cultural background but as an epistemological and ethical framework through which individuals interpret their experiences.



Figure 1. The Translator (1999)

This dimension becomes particularly evident through Sammar, the protagonist, a Sudanese widow working as an Arabic-English translator at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland. Following the sudden death of her husband, Tariq, and her separation from her son, Amir, who remains in Khartoum, Sammar experiences grief, loneliness, and cultural dislocation. Her emotional vulnerability is accompanied by a growing awareness of her position as a Muslim woman living in a

predominantly non-Muslim society. In response to these difficulties, she increasingly relies on prayer, remembrance of Allah, and religious reflection. Her conviction that "the Mercy of Allah is an Ocean" and that God tests human patience and faith illustrates how religious belief becomes a source of psychological resilience (Aboulela, 1999, p. 56). Her faith does not eliminate her suffering; rather, it provides a framework through which she understands and negotiates it.

Sammar's religious practices demonstrate that Islam is embedded in the ordinary dimensions of her life. Prayer, Qur'anic recitation, remembrance of Allah, fasting during Ramadan, and listening to the *adhan* become practices through which she maintains continuity with her religious identity despite geographical displacement. Her statement that prayer provides "the only stability in life" illustrates the importance of religious practice in sustaining her sense of security (Aboulela, 1999, p. 37). Similarly, her reflection that her fate is determined by Allah expresses an understanding of life through divine providence and spiritual dependence (Aboulela, 1999, pp. 73–74). These representations support the perspective of lived religion, which understands religious identity through everyday practices, personal experiences, and the meanings individuals attach to their lives (Ammerman, 2014; McGuire, 2008). Through Sammar, Aboulela challenges the assumption that Muslim women's religious commitment necessarily signifies passivity or the absence of individual agency.

The relationship between faith and personal agency is also reflected in Sammar's relationship with her surroundings. Initially, Aberdeen appears unfamiliar and emotionally alienating. She experiences differences in weather, language, architecture, and cultural practices as reminders of her displacement. She observes that the colours of Scotland differ from those she associates with Sudan, particularly the yellow and green that evoke memories of home (Aboulela, 1999, p. 44). Nevertheless, her growing familiarity with the city and her religious self-awareness gradually transform her experience of displacement. The streets that once appeared culturally unfamiliar become recognisable, and her everyday movement through the city acquires a sense of continuity. Her observation that "home and the past had come here and balanced just for her" suggests that belonging does not necessarily require the complete abandonment of one's cultural origins (Aboulela, 1999, p. 41). Instead, it can emerge through the negotiation of memory, religious identity, and present social experience.

This transformation is consistent with the argument that religious identity can provide migrants with resources for negotiating their position within unfamiliar cultural environments. Religion becomes a means of establishing continuity between the past and present, as well as between the homeland and the country of residence (Steiner, 2008). Sammar's experience therefore complicates the conventional opposition between integration and cultural preservation. She becomes increasingly familiar with Scottish society without relinquishing her

Islamic identity. Her experience suggests that belonging and religious commitment can coexist rather than being mutually exclusive.

The title *The Translator* carries both professional and symbolic significance. Sammar's occupation as an Arabic-English translator represents her position between different linguistic, cultural, and religious worlds. However, her role extends beyond the translation of language: she also mediates Islamic knowledge and Sudanese cultural experiences for Rae, a Scottish academic interested in Islam and Middle Eastern affairs. Through their conversations, Aboulela challenges the assumption that cultural differences necessarily produce antagonism. Instead, she presents intellectual exchange and mutual curiosity as possibilities for developing relationships across religious and cultural boundaries.

The relationship between Sammar and Rae develops through conversations about their personal histories, religious beliefs, and cultural backgrounds. Their shared interest in Africa and their discussions about Sudanese history create a space in which each character can articulate experiences that might otherwise remain unfamiliar to the other. Rae's interest in Sammar's translation of the Hadith Qudsi further demonstrates that intellectual engagement with Islam can emerge from curiosity rather than political suspicion. Their conversations gradually transform Sammar's experience of loneliness, enabling her to communicate her memories and articulate her identity. Rae's statement, "You make me feel safe. I feel safe when I talk to you," illustrates that intercultural dialogue operates in both directions: Sammar is not merely an object of Western curiosity but also a subject whose presence provides emotional security to another individual (Aboulela, 1999, p. 51).

This relationship can be understood through postcolonial theories of cultural negotiation. The interaction between Sammar and Rae challenges the rigid division between the Western Self and the Eastern Other by presenting both characters as participants in a process of mutual learning. The novel does not position Sammar solely as someone who must adapt to Western culture; she also becomes an interpreter who introduces Rae to Islamic intellectual and spiritual traditions. This reciprocal relationship corresponds to the argument that translation in postcolonial literature can create opportunities for cultural exchange and mutual transformation (Osei-Nyame, 2009). Similarly, the novel constructs alternative models of identity through intercultural communication rather than through the preservation of fixed cultural boundaries (Hassan, 2008).

The significance of this dialogue becomes clearer when Sammar explains her cultural background and religious convictions to Rae. Their conversations enable her to articulate her understanding of Islam without being subjected to immediate rejection or ridicule. The narrator observes that Sammar had been given "permission to think and talk," and that Rae would not be surprised by what she said (Aboulela, 1999, p. 46). This moment is important because it contrasts with Sammar's earlier experience of silence and cultural alienation. It also invites a reading through

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's discussion of subaltern representation, particularly the problem of marginalised subjects being spoken for rather than being allowed to articulate their own experiences (Spivak, 1988). In Aboulela's narrative, Sammar increasingly becomes an active speaking subject who explains her religious and cultural world rather than remaining an object of external representation.

Osei-Nyame (2009) similarly identifies intercultural dialogue as a central concern of *The Translator*, arguing that Sammar's role as a translator mediates the relationship between Africa and the West, the Self and the Other, and different cultural and political traditions. This interpretation demonstrates that translation in the novel should not be understood merely as linguistic transfer. It also represents the possibility of explaining, negotiating, and reconsidering cultural differences. Through Sammar and Rae, Aboulela presents intercultural communication as a humanistic practice that challenges the antagonistic assumptions underlying reductive representations of Islam and Muslims

Aboulela's challenge to dominant Western representations also operates through her use of Arabic expressions and Sudanese cultural references. Expressions such as *alhamdulillah*, *assalamu alaykum*, and *insha'Allah* are incorporated into the English narrative without being entirely translated or replaced by English equivalents. Their presence preserves the linguistic texture of Muslim everyday life and introduces readers to the vocabulary through which religious beliefs and social relationships are expressed. The inclusion of terms such as *habbaha*, *kerkedeh*, *falafel*, and *tobe* further demonstrates how language and material culture contribute to the construction of cultural identity (Laennec, 2010).

This strategy is significant because the English language is not treated as a neutral medium that requires the complete assimilation of other linguistic traditions. Instead, Aboulela allows Arabic and Sudanese expressions to remain visible within the English text. Such a strategy challenges the assumption that cultural difference must be translated into familiar Western categories to become intelligible. The use of indigenous linguistic elements can therefore be understood as a form of cultural negotiation that preserves the presence of multiple knowledge systems within Anglophone literature (Cooper, 2008).

Material culture also plays an important role in the relationship between Sammar and Rae. One example is the Sudanese soup that Sammar prepares for Rae during his illness. The preparation combines a traditional recipe associated with her homeland with ingredients available in Scotland. This ordinary domestic activity becomes a symbolic encounter between two cultural environments. The food retains its Sudanese associations while being adapted to the material conditions of Scottish life. Such an example demonstrates that cultural identity is not necessarily preserved through isolation but can be maintained and transformed through everyday interaction (Cooper, 2008).

The novel also introduces different religious imaginations through the contrast between Rae's childhood exposure to Christian imagery and Sammar's memories of Qur'anic recitation. Whereas Rae recalls illustrated books depicting angels and biblical narratives, Sammar remembers learning and reciting Qur'anic verses during childhood, including moments of fear and uncertainty (Aboulela, 1999, p. 102). The Qur'an therefore appears not merely as a sacred text but as an embodied presence in Sammar's memory and emotional life. Her explanation of the Qur'an as a miracle revealed to the Prophet Muhammad also introduces Rae to the relationship between its linguistic form, recitation, and spiritual significance (Aboulela, 1999, pp. 121–124). Through these contrasting memories, Aboulela presents different religious experiences without reducing either character to a fixed cultural stereotype.

Although Sammar and Rae develop an intimate relationship, Aboulela does not represent intercultural love as a process in which religious differences must automatically disappear. Sammar's affection for Rae does not lead her to abandon her Islamic convictions. Her understanding of marriage remains connected to her religious commitments, and she recognises that their relationship cannot proceed unless Rae accepts Islam. Rae, however, initially approaches Islam through intellectual curiosity and academic interest rather than spiritual conviction. This difference exposes the limits of intercultural dialogue: mutual respect and intellectual understanding do not necessarily produce identical religious commitments.

Sammar's decision to return to Khartoum after Rae refuses to convert demonstrates that religious identity remains central to her agency. She refuses to sacrifice her faith for romantic fulfilment. Her return is therefore not simply a withdrawal from Western society but a decision to maintain the religious and personal boundaries through which she understands herself. The novel describes Khartoum as a place where she is rarely alone and where the familiar environment provides emotional reassurance (Aboulela, 1999, pp. 157–160). Her return also reconnects her with familiar natural and cultural surroundings, including the sounds of the *adhan*, the colours of the landscape, and the sensory memories of home (Aboulela, 1999, pp. 143–144).

The conclusion of the novel complicates the relationship between religious difference and intercultural belonging. Rae eventually embraces Islam and communicates his decision to Sammar. His conversion is presented as a personal religious choice rather than merely a romantic concession. His statement that Islam is not “a religion of suffering” and is not confined to a particular geographical location reinforces the novel's presentation of Islam as a universal religious tradition (Aboulela, 1999, p. 198). The use of the plural pronoun “ours” in their final conversation symbolises the development of shared religious belonging. Nevertheless, this ending should not be interpreted as suggesting that intercultural

harmony requires the conversion of the non-Muslim Other. Rather, it illustrates one possible narrative resolution in which mutual understanding is accompanied by a freely chosen religious transformation.

Through Sammar, Aboulela challenges the stereotype of Muslim women as submissive subjects whose identities are determined entirely by male authority or Western expectations. Sammar makes decisions about love, marriage, migration, and religious commitment. Her agency is expressed not through the abandonment of religion but through her ability to make choices consistent with her beliefs. This representation complicates secular assumptions that individual autonomy and religious devotion are necessarily incompatible (Morey, 2017). It also demonstrates how Islamic faith can function as a resource through which a woman negotiates her identity and exercises personal agency.

Laila Halaby's Once in a Promised Land (2007): Islamophobia and Muslim Everyday Experiences

Unlike Aboulela, who foregrounds spiritual experience and intercultural dialogue, Laila Halaby examines the consequences of post-9/11 Islamophobia through the everyday experiences of Arab and Muslim characters in the United States. *Once in a Promised Land* follows Jassim and Salwa Haddad, a Jordanian couple living in Tucson, Arizona, whose relatively comfortable lives change dramatically following the September 11 attacks. Halaby establishes the central problem from the beginning by observing that the characters become visible to readers after the World Trade Center attacks, which were carried out by individuals identified as Arabs and Muslims (Halaby, 2007, pp. vii–viii). Their identities consequently become associated with terrorism despite their lack of involvement in the attacks. This narrative demonstrates how political events can transform ordinary ethnic and religious identities into grounds for suspicion and exclusion (El Said, 2003; Lamghari, 2023; Valassopoulos, 2014).

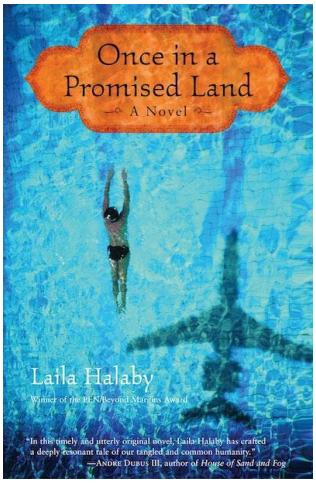

Figure 2. Once in a Promised Land by Laila Halaby (2007)

The novel illustrates Islamophobia through ordinary social interactions and institutional practices. During a shopping trip, Jassim is followed by a security employee because his behaviour is considered suspicious. Salwa responds sarcastically, questioning whether her husband is suspected of intending to bomb the shopping centre while wearing his expensive shoes (Halaby, 2007, p. 30). More seriously, Jassim becomes the subject of an FBI investigation because his professional position as a hydrologist gives him access to the city's water infrastructure. He rejects the suspicion directed towards him on the basis of his ethnicity and religion, explaining: "I am a normal citizen who happens to be an Arab" (Halaby, 2007, p. 232). His eventual dismissal further demonstrates how racial and religious stereotypes can undermine professional recognition and social participation (Fadda-Conrey, 2006; Salaita, 2007).

However, Halaby does not portray Arab and Muslim characters merely as passive victims of discrimination. Jassim is a responsible hydrologist committed to ensuring the safety and accessibility of water, while Salwa is an independent professional woman who actively expresses her opinions and challenges discriminatory assumptions. Jassim's attachment to water, expressed through the statement that "Jassim loved water" (Halaby, 2007, p. 11), symbolises his commitment to environmental preservation and public welfare. Meanwhile, Salwa's professional identity and personal decisions challenge the stereotype of Muslim women as submissive and voiceless. Their experiences demonstrate that Arab, Muslim, and American identities can coexist, even when the surrounding society attempts to treat them as incompatible. Halaby thus presents Muslim characters as individuals with professional responsibilities, personal aspirations, and ethical commitments rather than as representatives of political extremism (Lamghari, 2023; Naem, 2024; Valassopoulos, 2014).

Whereas Aboulela foregrounds religious faith and intercultural dialogue, Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) examines the social consequences of Islamophobia and racialisation following the September 11 attacks. The novel follows Jassim and Salwa Haddad, a Jordanian couple living in Tucson, Arizona, whose everyday lives are transformed by the political and social climate after the attacks. Halaby establishes this context from the opening of the novel by emphasising that the characters become visible to readers through the historical event that transformed public perceptions of Arabs and Muslims (Halaby, 2007, pp. vii–viii). Their identities are increasingly interpreted through the dominant association between Arabness, Muslimness, and terrorism, despite their lack of involvement in the attacks.

Before September 11, Jassim and Salwa enjoy professional stability and a relatively comfortable life. Jassim works as a hydrologist, while Salwa is employed as a banker. Their everyday routines resemble those of other middle-class Americans. However, the attacks change the way their neighbours, colleagues, and public

institutions perceive them. Their experiences demonstrate how political events can transform ordinary markers of identity into grounds for suspicion and social exclusion. Salwa's concern about the repercussions for Arab communities reflects the fear that collective blame will be directed towards individuals simply because of their ethnic or religious backgrounds (Halaby, 2007, p. 21).

This process becomes visible in the couple's encounters with other Americans. During a shopping trip, a security employee follows Jassim because his presence is considered suspicious. Salwa challenges this treatment through an ironic question about whether her husband is suspected of intending to bomb the shopping centre despite wearing expensive shoes (Halaby, 2007, p. 30). The episode illustrates how the suspicion attached to Muslim identity can penetrate ordinary social interactions. Rather than being evaluated according to their actual behaviour, Jassim and Salwa are interpreted through preconceived images of Arab and Muslim people.

The novel further explores how such prejudice becomes institutionalised through surveillance and security investigations. Jassim receives a request from the FBI to answer questions, and his professional work as a hydrologist becomes a source of suspicion because he has access to the city's water infrastructure. During the investigation, he insists that his professional responsibility is to make water safe and accessible to the public, not to endanger it. He objects to the assumption that his Arab background and Muslim upbringing should make him a potential threat (Halaby, 2007, p. 232). This episode reveals how racial and religious categorisation can override professional competence, individual conduct, and civic responsibility.

The workplace also becomes a site where Islamophobic assumptions are reproduced. Jassim's colleague Bella records details about him, while his manager Marcus becomes increasingly uncertain about his loyalty. Eventually, Jassim loses his position amid the suspicion surrounding his identity. Salwa recognises the discriminatory nature of this treatment when she questions whether an American employee would have been investigated in the same way (Halaby, 2007, pp. 236–237, 301). These events demonstrate that Islamophobia is not confined to verbal hostility or individual prejudice; it can also operate through institutional practices that affect employment, professional recognition, and social participation.

These representations are consistent with scholarship examining the relationship between post-9/11 racialisation and Arab American belonging. The novel illustrates how the distinction between the Self and the Other becomes intensified through political discourse that divides society into those who belong and those who are perceived as potential threats (El Said, 2003). Its portrayal of surveillance and social suspicion also demonstrates how anti-Arab racism and Islamophobia can intersect with institutional practices and ordinary interpersonal relationships (Salaita, 2007). Halaby therefore presents Islamophobia not simply as

an ideological attitude but as a social process that shapes the everyday experiences and opportunities of Muslim and Arab American individuals.

Although *Once in a Promised Land* depicts the discrimination experienced by Arab and Muslim characters, Halaby does not reduce them to passive victims. Jassim and Salwa are portrayed as educated, professionally successful, and socially engaged individuals who contribute to American society. Their professional identities challenge the stereotype that Arabs and Muslims are outsiders who do not participate in or contribute to Western social life. Jassim's work as a hydrologist is particularly significant because it represents his commitment to public welfare and environmental protection.

Water becomes an important symbolic element in Jassim's characterisation. His attachment to water and his professional concern for its safety and accessibility reflect a sense of responsibility towards the environment and the wider community (Halaby, 2007, p. 11). This aspect of the narrative is particularly important because it contrasts sharply with the suspicion directed towards him during the FBI investigation. While others imagine him as a potential threat to the city's water supply, his professional identity is grounded in the protection of that very resource. The contrast exposes the irrationality of stereotypes that define individuals through ethnic or religious categories rather than their actual actions and ethical commitments.

Salwa also represents an active Muslim and Arab woman whose identity cannot be reduced to the stereotype of female submissiveness. As a professional banker, she possesses economic independence and the capacity to articulate her concerns. Her reactions to discrimination demonstrate her willingness to challenge assumptions imposed on her and her husband. Her character therefore complicates representations of Muslim women as voiceless subjects who lack autonomy. Rather than presenting empowerment as the abandonment of cultural identity, Halaby shows that Salwa negotiates her Arab and American affiliations while maintaining her professional and personal aspirations.

The novel also reveals the complexity of hyphenated identities. Jassim and Salwa are simultaneously connected to Jordanian, Arab, Muslim, and American cultural environments. Their identities are not mutually exclusive, although the surrounding society frequently treats them as incompatible. Their everyday practices, including preparing food associated with their homeland and participating in American professional life, demonstrate how cultural belonging can be negotiated through ordinary experiences. The distinction between Arab and American identities becomes particularly visible in the comments made by Penny, who differentiates between supposedly acceptable Arabs and those she associates with oppression and violence (Halaby, 2007, p. 281). Her statement reveals that even apparently sympathetic attitudes can reproduce the binary distinction between a supposedly civilised West and a supposedly backward East.

Through these characters, Halaby challenges the expectation that Muslim immigrants must prove their compatibility with Western society by abandoning their cultural or religious affiliations. Instead, the novel suggests that citizenship and social belonging should be assessed through individual conduct, ethical responsibility, and participation in society rather than through ethnic or religious stereotypes. This representation is consistent with the argument that Arab American literature provides an important space for articulating identities that have been marginalised or rendered invisible within dominant cultural narratives (Fadda-Conrey, 2006; Salaita, 2007).

Comparative Analysis: Reimagining Islam through Everyday Muslim Experiences

Although Aboulela and Halaby employ different narrative strategies, both challenge stereotypical representations of Islam by foregrounding the complexity of Muslim everyday life. Aboulela emphasises religious faith, spiritual resilience, and intercultural dialogue, whereas Halaby focuses on racialisation, institutional discrimination, and the negotiation of Arab-Muslim identity in post-9/11 America. Their approaches can be summarised as follows:

Although Leila Aboulela and Laila Halaby employ different narrative strategies, both writers challenge Islamophobic representations by portraying Muslims through the complexity of their everyday experiences. Rather than directly confronting anti-Muslim prejudice through political argument or theological debate, their novels construct counter-narratives by presenting Muslim characters as individuals whose lives are shaped by faith, family, work, love, cultural negotiation, and social relationships. This narrative strategy is significant because Islamophobia frequently operates through the reduction of Muslim identities to simplified categories, in which religious affiliation becomes a marker of cultural difference, suspicion, or perceived threat. By shifting the narrative focus from abstract representations of Islam to the ordinary experiences of Muslim characters, Aboulela and Halaby expose the limitations of such reductive perceptions.

In *The Translator* (1999), Aboulela develops this counter-narrative through the representation of Sammar's religious and emotional life in Scotland. Sammar's everyday religious practices, including prayer, Qur'anic recitation, remembrance of Allah, and fasting, demonstrate that Islam is not merely an ideological identity but an embodied source of meaning, stability, and spiritual resilience. Her religious commitment shapes how she understands personal loss, negotiates her relationship with Rae, and makes decisions about her future. Through Sammar, Aboulela challenges representations that associate Muslim women exclusively with passivity, oppression, or an inability to exercise personal agency. Sammar's decisions emerge from her own religious convictions and emotional reflections. Her faith does not eliminate personal difficulties; rather, it provides an ethical and spiritual framework through which she confronts them.

Aboulela also resists cultural stereotypes by constructing intercultural dialogue between Sammar and Rae. Their relationship demonstrates that religious and cultural differences do not necessarily prevent intellectual intimacy or mutual understanding. Their conversations about Islam, Christianity, culture, and social values create a narrative space in which Islam can be encountered through dialogue rather than through preconceived assumptions. Importantly, Rae's growing interest in Islam does not function simply as proof of Islam's superiority over another religion. Instead, their relationship illustrates the possibility of understanding religious difference through personal encounters, questions, and mutual recognition. Aboulela thus challenges the assumption that Muslim and Western identities are necessarily incompatible. The novel presents intercultural communication as a process through which individuals can reconsider their assumptions about one another.

While Aboulela foregrounds the spiritual and relational dimensions of Muslim life, Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) exposes the everyday mechanisms through which Islamophobia and anti-Arab racism are reproduced in post-9/11 America. Through Jassim and Salwa Haddad, Halaby demonstrates how Muslim and Arab identities become objects of suspicion in ordinary social environments. Experiences such as being watched in shopping centres, facing suspicion from colleagues, undergoing FBI scrutiny, and experiencing professional exclusion reveal that Islamophobia does not operate exclusively through explicit hostility or public political discourse. It can also be reproduced through routine interactions, institutional procedures, and assumptions about national belonging.

Jassim's professional identity as a hydrologist is particularly important to this critique. His commitment to water research and public welfare represents a form of social contribution that contradicts the stereotype of Muslims as threats to Western society. His statement, “I am a normal citizen who happens to be an Arab” (Halaby, 2007, p. 232), articulates the central tension of the novel: his ordinary citizenship is repeatedly overshadowed by the racial and religious categories through which others perceive him. Halaby exposes the injustice of a social environment in which Arab identity and presumed Muslim affiliation can become grounds for suspicion, despite the absence of evidence of wrongdoing. In this sense, the novel demonstrates how Islamophobia transforms ordinary citizenship into a condition that must continually be justified.

Salwa's experiences further complicate the representation of Muslim women in Western societies. She is not merely a figure defined by her husband's experiences or by her religious and ethnic background. Her professional ambitions, personal desires, and responses to social pressure establish her as an individual with agency. Through Salwa, Halaby challenges the tendency to represent Muslim women as passive victims of either patriarchal culture or religious tradition. Her character reveals the complexity of negotiating gender, marriage, professional

identity, and social belonging within a context shaped by racialised perceptions. Consequently, the novel questions not only stereotypes about Muslims but also the assumptions through which Muslim women's lives are interpreted from outside their own experiences. The different narrative strategies of the two novels can be understood through the following comparative dimensions:

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Everyday Muslim Identity, Religious Practices, and Intercultural Relations

Analytical dimension	Leila Aboulela, *The Translator* (1999)	Laila Halaby, *Once in a Promised Land* (2007)	Critical significance
Religious identity	Sammar's prayer, Qur'anic recitation, remembrance of Allah, and fasting	Muslim identity is present within the characters' cultural and personal backgrounds	Islam is represented beyond political stereotypes and as part of everyday life
Identity negotiation	Sammar negotiates Sudanese, Muslim, and diasporic identities in Scotland	Jassim and Salwa negotiate Arab, Muslim, and American affiliations	Muslim identities are multiple, dynamic, and contextually negotiated
Intercultural relations	Dialogue between Sammar and Rae creates mutual intellectual and religious understanding	Encounters with colleagues, neighbours, and institutions expose social prejudice	Cultural interaction can produce understanding but may also reproduce exclusion
Gender and agency	Sammar maintains religious convictions while making decisions about love and marriage	Salwa exercises professional and personal agency amid discrimination	Muslim women are represented as active subjects rather than passive stereotypes
Everyday experience	Prayer, language, food, memory, and domestic practices	Employment, shopping, professional responsibilities, marriage, and public encounters	Ordinary experiences reveal how religion and cultural identity are lived
Resistance to stereotypes	Islamic faith is presented as a source of meaning, dignity, and spiritual resilience	Muslim characters are portrayed as responsible professionals and ordinary citizens	Both novels challenge the reduction of Muslims to extremism, oppression, and cultural incompatibility
Humanistic orientation	Mutual respect and religious understanding between Sammar and Rae	Recognition of individual dignity beyond racial and religious categorisation	Intercultural understanding requires recognising the humanity and agency of the Other

The comparison demonstrates that Aboulela and Halaby employ different but complementary narrative strategies. Aboulela challenges Islamophobic representations by foregrounding the spiritual and ethical dimensions of Muslim

everyday life. Through Sammar, Islam emerges as a source of emotional resilience, intellectual engagement, and personal agency. Halaby, in contrast, exposes how Islamophobia operates through everyday interactions, workplace practices, and institutional surveillance. Through Jassim and Salwa, she demonstrates that Muslim identity cannot legitimately be treated as evidence of political disloyalty or social danger.

Both authors also challenge the binary opposition between the West and the East. Their characters are not presented as representatives of two completely separate civilisations but as individuals whose lives involve cultural exchange, negotiation, and overlapping identities. This approach resonates with postcolonial critiques of fixed cultural boundaries and with the understanding of religion as an everyday practice embedded in social relationships and material experiences (Bhabha, 1994; Ammerman, 2014; McGuire, 2008). The novels therefore suggest that Muslim identity is neither exclusively determined by religious doctrine nor reducible to ethnic or national affiliation. Instead, it emerges through the interaction of faith, memory, gender, work, family, and social environment.

Ultimately, the humanising potential of both novels lies in their ability to represent Muslims as complex human subjects rather than as objects of political or cultural judgement. Their narratives invite readers to reconsider the assumptions through which Islam and Muslims are understood in Western societies. This literary intervention resonates with Said's humanistic argument that humanism constitutes an important form of resistance against injustice and dehumanisation (Said, 2004, p. 878). Through the everyday experiences of their characters, Aboulela and Halaby demonstrate that intercultural understanding begins with recognising the dignity, agency, and humanity of individuals whose identities have frequently been reduced to stereotypes.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* (1999) and Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) challenge stereotypical representations of Islam and Muslims through the portrayal of complex everyday experiences in Western societies. Drawing on postcolonial theory and the perspective of lived religion, the analysis reveals two complementary narrative strategies. Aboulela foregrounds Islamic faith, spiritual resilience, female agency, and intercultural dialogue through Sammar's experiences as a Sudanese Muslim woman in Scotland. In contrast, Halaby exposes the everyday operation of Islamophobia, racialisation, institutional surveillance, and social exclusion through Jassim and Salwa's experiences in post-9/11 America. The study contributes to postcolonial literary scholarship and the study of lived religion by bringing these perspectives together in a comparative framework that conceptualises fiction as a cultural counter-narrative. It demonstrates that representing Muslims through ordinary experiences

of faith, work, family, love, and social interaction can challenge reductive cultural assumptions and foreground their dignity, agency, and complex identities. Fiction thus provides an important space for questioning Islamophobic representations and encouraging intercultural understanding, although its capacity to change readers' attitudes cannot be established through textual analysis alone.

Despite these contributions, the study has several limitations. Its analysis is restricted to two novels and therefore cannot represent the diversity of Muslim experiences, literary traditions, and social contexts across Western societies. Furthermore, its reliance on close reading and textual interpretation does not examine how actual readers receive, interpret, or respond to the novels, nor does it establish their measurable impact on Islamophobic attitudes. The distinction between Arab and Muslim identities also requires careful consideration to avoid treating ethnic and religious affiliations as interchangeable categories. Future research could expand the comparative corpus to include additional Muslim writers and literary works from different Western contexts, while incorporating reader-response studies, interviews, or reception analysis to investigate how literary counter-narratives influence perceptions of Islam and Muslims. Further research could also examine the intersections of gender, race, class, and religious identity in contemporary Muslim fiction. Such approaches would provide a broader understanding of the role of literature not only in contesting Islamophobic representations but also in negotiating recognition, belonging, and cultural coexistence in increasingly diverse societies.

Declarations

Author Contribution Statement

FMMA was solely responsible for the conceptualization and design of the study, identification and selection of literary sources, data collection through close reading and textual documentation, qualitative comparative literary analysis, interpretation of findings, and manuscript preparation and revision. The author also developed the analytical framework by integrating Edward Said's postcolonial critique of Orientalism with the perspective of lived religion. The author reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Data Availability Statement

The primary data for this study consist of textual passages from Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* (1999) and Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007). These literary works are publicly available through their respective publishers, libraries, and other legitimate literary distribution channels. Secondary data consist of published academic literature and scholarly sources cited in the article. No original interview,

survey, or other primary empirical dataset was generated or collected for this research.

Declaration of Interests Statement

The author declares that there are no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced, or be perceived to have influenced, the research reported in this article.

AI Usage Statement

Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools, if used, were employed only in a limited capacity to support the technical aspects of manuscript preparation, including language refinement, grammar checking, and improvements to academic expression and textual organisation. The selection and interpretation of literary passages, comparative analysis, theoretical arguments, and research conclusions remain the intellectual responsibility of the author. AI tools did not replace the author's critical reading, literary interpretation, scholarly judgement, or academic validation. The author takes full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the final manuscript.

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