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SPIRITUALITY AND ISLAMIC FEMINISM: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF RELIGIOUS AGENCY IN SELECTED LITERARY AND CINEMATIC WORKS

A Thesis Submitted in Fulfilment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Postcolonial Studies

By

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To my beloved husband, Mufadhi, and dear children, Wajd and Abdulaziz, with perpetual love
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Abstract

Islamic ideological evolution has been hugely affected by the cultural and political attributions of both colonisation and neo-colonisation. This is particularly evident in the polarising controversy over religious women’s agency, which continues to engage many Islamic feminists. This research critically examines the religious agency of Muslim women as a product of the postcolonial ideological, historical and political factors that have shaped contemporary religious discourse, with a particular focus on Sufi informed religious agency. Sufism offers ideological and aesthetic tools that can empower agency in Islamic feminist writing, such as the spiritual ecology that is derived from Ibn ‘Arabi’s waḥdat al-wujūd. Sufi literature is often critically analysed within the framework of Magical Realism, and this literary critical approach determines the reading of the mystical elements. These elements are therefore perceived as myths. This thesis avoids this critical mistake by asserting that these mystical aspects are faith-based articulations of resistance to the ideological normativity, of postcolonial ideologies.

This research examines a number of Sufi-based feminist novels: Leila Aboulela’s Minaret (2005), “Days Rotate” (2001) and The Kindness of Enemies (2015); Raja Alem’s My Thousand and One Nights (2007) and Fatma (2002); as well as the film Bab’Aziz (2005) by Nacer Khemir. The study of feminist views and the representation of women’s agency affiliated with Sufism permits a further understanding of the literary and cinematic resistance to the normativity within which Sufi literature has been read. This study reveals that the novelists’ and cinematic director’s perspectives on spiritual women’s agency, as articulated in the works under scrutiny, accommodate variable views of religious knowledge. This not only encourages different levels of engagement in the textual traditions as a source of agency but also instigates considerable engagement with the political issues that are integral to Sufism and women’s agency. Overall, this research problematises both the normative consideration of Sufism and feminist engagement in the religious agency of Muslim women.
This thesis embarks upon a study of Muslim women’s religious agency in five Sufi literary texts and a cinematic film. It does so by engaging with two main ideological frameworks: Islamic feminism and Sufism. Islamic feminism is approached as an ideology that is problematised by a postcolonial historical rupture. This rupture, as will become evident in this investigation, represents a postcolonial phenomenon in which the ideological struggle over the past leads to the failure to produce legitimate and productive engagements with the present. Sufism is approached according to the way it correlates to this rupture both as a spiritual resource of agency and as an ideological refuge for many postcolonial literary figures to redeem the enforced detachment from the present. The investigation of agency in this research makes explicit the literary expressions of the historical and political struggles of postcolonial subjects as being key components of agency. It will attempt to show the extent to which the religious agency of postcolonial Muslim women has been complicated by secular modernity. Secular modernity permeates postcolonial history and complicates Islamic feminists’ debates on women’s agency. That is, these debates are incomplete without a determination of the contributor’s position with regard to the West and Western modernity. The political factor will be investigated in relation to the rise of political Islam in the postcolonial nation-states. Situating women at the heart of the Islam/West antithesis, political Islam produces patriarchal orientations that promote women’s subjugation in the name of guarding the religion. This research aims to reveal the manner in which Sufi-informed agency complicates the historical and political situation of postcolonial Muslim women.

By embarking on a critical investigation of selected literary texts and a film, this study argues that Sufism has provided an alternative framework for postcolonial literature, a framework which offers the ideological and aesthetic tools which facilitate the expressions of individual struggles for agency. However, as will be discussed in due course, the wide critical association between Sufi literature and Magical Realism limits this potential of Sufi literature to the mystical elements, such as visions, which are read as magical. This conditions the significance of the mystical elements, confining it to their influence on the material world. The term “Magical Realism” was coined by Franz Roh in his book Post-expressionism, Magic Realism: Problems of the Most Recent European Paintings (1925) to describe the artistic phenomenon he observed among German and European painters (Bowres 9). The association between Sufism and Magical Realism is superficially proven by the thematic and geopolitical relevance of both Sufism and Magical
Realism to the postcolonial world as well as to politically and economically peripheral countries. It is true that prominent writers of Magical Realist literature, as Bowers indicates, come from Latin American (e.g. Gabriel García Márquez), African American (Toni Morrison), British Muslim (Salman Rushdie) and feminist (Isabel Allende) backgrounds (Bowers 31-2), all of which correlate in one way or another to political and cultural margins. As will become clear in the investigation of Ziad Elmarsafy’s and Wail Hassan’s arguments, Sufism has been revived in similarly marginal contexts, because of its wealth of ideological and literary tools that can substitute for the Eurocentric ideologies which fail to perform on non-European soils. Apart from this geopolitical relevance, the association between Magical Realism and Sufism is, in fact, a product of the generic reference to Magical Realism as an interpretive theory suitable for eccentric literature, including Sufi texts, at the margins of European Realism. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in Outside in the Teaching Machine (1993), criticised the literary-critical construction of Magical Realism as reflective of “Third World” literature (57). She explains that such a construction is, in fact, Eurocentric, because it establishes a framework of fiction written “in the consciousness of marginality” to the West: “Neo-colonialism is fabricating its allies by proposing a share of the center in a seemingly new way (not a rupture but a displacement): disciplinary support for the conviction of authentic marginality by the (aspiring) elite” (58). She criticised it because it establishes the West as ideologically superior to the postcolonial world and postcolonial expatriate or diasporic writers. Assuming that magic and myth are intrinsic to the literary production of the “Third World” is a result of the stereotype that this world is ideologically inadequate. The employment of Magical Realism as a defining literary mode and critical lens, therefore, denotes that this literature gains its meaning by its relation to the centre.

Reading Sufi texts within the framework of Magical Realism is another attribute of this normalisation. Sufism is asserted, like Magical Realism, as an aesthetic tool of the margin. As the discussion will elucidate shortly, the critical readings of Raja Alem and Leila Aboulela have been influenced by this situation because of their treatment of mystical dimensions as magical and their focus on this dimension as an identifier of Sufi works. This works in two interrelated ways: the way Alem’s writing has always been read as magical realism and the disassociation of Aboulela’s writing from Sufism, despite its clear relation to it, because it does not follow the same style of narrative.

This study sets out to examine a selection of literary works and a film. These include Leila Aboulela’s The Kindness of Enemies (2015), Minaret (2005), and her short story “Days Rotate” (2001); Raja Alem’s My Thousand and One Nights (2007) and Fatma
(2002); and Nacer Khemir’s film Bab’Aziz (2005). The selection of these works is prompted by the postcolonial framework within which the writers’ and cinematic director’s views of religious agency are articulated. The selection is also informed by the variable Sufi affiliations exemplified in these works. Sufism in these works is not only an aesthetic expression but a system of belief. Its influence is paramount both on the style of each narrative and its feminist position. Except for Alem’s My Thousand and One Nights, which was published originally in Arabic with the title Sidi Wahdana in 1998 and underwent a complicated translation process (which will be discussed in chapter 5), all of the novels were published originally in English. The film includes dialogue and songs in Arabic, Farsi and minimal Hindi and is subtitled in English. The film is included in this study because of the richness offered by its visual representation of women’s agency in Sufism. The depiction of women’s agency in this film through visual adaptation of Sufi motifs transcends the barrier of language as a hindrance in capturing mystical experience. More importantly, Khemir’s film, which will be discussed in chapter 4, epitomises the same Sufi ideology expressed by Alem. Consequently, reading the representation of women in Khemir’s film side by side with Alem’s feminist depiction reveals how Sufi conceptions of women can be deployed within the artist’s views of gender relations to produce an agentic model that is independent of the influence of those fundamentalist readings of Sharia that undermine women’s rights and position them as subordinate to men. The two artists represent a Sufi view of the universe as being spiritual and as exerting power over the individual. They depict spiritual ecology as a substantial factor in shaping an individualistic form of agency that can empower spiritual women. A reading of the ecological dimension of Sufism is developed extensively in Chapters 4 and 5, showing it to be integral to a feminist reading of the two artists’ works.

The study employs a combination of methodological approaches in order to achieve an informative reading of the selected works. It utilises a textual approach in its examination of the Sufi motifs used by the authors and cinematic director. The investigation of textual elements shows complex allusions to classical Sufi quotes, poems and anecdotes, the investigation of which assists in revealing symbolically communicated notions related to agency. The study also uses a contextual analysis via the historically and theologically mindful approach to Sufi affiliations expressed in the texts and film. This identification is necessary to achieve an understanding of specific notions promoted by these Sufi affiliations regarding views of the human, the sacred and the universe, as well as the way such views influence the depiction of women’s agency. The Sufi affiliation

1 Muhammad Al-Niffarî says, “The more you see, the narrower the means of expressing it” (108). Translated by Adonis (95).
determines which of these factors takes the lead either as contributing to or problematising agency, rendering aspects of individualistic and collective agentic patterns manifest in one or the other of the works under scrutiny. The contextual overview shows that postcolonial ideologies, including Sufism and Islamic feminism, bear the brunt of the ideological aggression of colonial epistemology.

1. Islamic Feminism and Postcolonialism:

Laura E. Donaldson and Kwok Pui-Ian state, in their Introduction to Postcolonialism, Feminism and Religious Discourse (2002), that there is a need for studies which examine the interaction among issues of gender, religion and colonialism:

> Without critical attention to colonial representation and epistemic violence, feminist scholarship in religion has the danger of replicating the colonial gaze in the name of serving a feminist agenda. Likewise, any discussion of colonialism and religion must recognize that gender asymmetry was (and still is) a dominant metaphor for describing the colonizers and the colonized, domination and submission (2-3).

The juxtaposition, and the intersectional analysis following from it, of the three categories of gender, religion and colonialism is necessary for a sound understanding of postcolonial religious women’s situations. This juxtaposition enables an avoidance of Eurocentric views of women’s rights. This study examines Islamic feminism as an ideological field which has been influenced by the postcolonial paradigm. For Islamic feminism, as will become evident in chapter 1, the “epistemic violence” is related to the way postcolonial Muslim women’s agency is complicated by their otherness to Eurocentric and secular conceptualisations of agency. As chapter 1 will illustrate, religious agency is complicated by the dominance of secularism within modern humanism.

Islamic feminism is a movement comprising debates on women’s rights as stated in the Shari’a. The term “Islamic feminism” was first used by Miriam Cooke in her 2001 book Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature, which scrutinises feminist efforts among Muslim women in the Middle East (viii). It has been defined by Deniz Kandiyoti as “a progressive reading of the Quran, the Hadith and of early Islamic history” (1). However, many Muslim women writers resist such terminology, because of their fears of being classified as Western or radical, instead favouring terms which represent the movement as stemming from their own indigenous culture, for example “unthawiyat” [womanists] (Al-Ali qtd. in Cooke ix). The resistance to the term “feminism”, or “nasawiiat”, as a Western label, is an indication of the skepticism and
hostility within Islamic feminism regarding the West’s ideological impact. This gap stems from the perceived adverse positions taken up by the West and Western culture towards Islam and from the interaction of Islamic feminism with the colonial discourse regarding women’s veiling.

Islamic feminists’ debates on Muslim women’s agency are complicated by the way these women, or more precisely their bodies, are centralised in political and cultural conflicts in the colonial and postcolonial eras. Leila Ahmed explains that since the seventeenth century, “the peculiar practices of Islam with respect to women had always formed part of the Western narrative of the quintessential otherness and inferiority of Islam” (149). In the nineteenth century, the veiled and secluded Muslim woman became central to the Western impression of Islam as “inferior” to the Western culture (150). This inferiority, built upon the image of the oppressed Muslim woman, was continually asserted to legitimise colonisation (150). Ahmed illustrates how the emergence of feminism in the Victorian era further centralised women in the colonial discourse:

…colonial feminism, or feminism as used against other cultures in the service of colonialism, was shaped into a variety of similar constructs, each tailored to fit the particular culture that was the immediate target of domination — India, the Islamic world, sub-Saharan Africa … Broadly speaking, the thesis of the discourse on Islam blending a colonialism committed to male dominance with feminism — the thesis of the new colonial discourse of Islam centered on women — was that Islam was innately and immutably oppressive to women, that the veil and segregation epitomized that oppression, and that these customs were the fundamental reasons for the general and comprehensive backwardness of Islamic societies. (151-2)

For Ahmed, the association of feminist language with colonialist aims leads to the conclusion that for Islamic societies to be civilised, Islam — symbolised in the veil — has to be abandoned (152). In Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil, Katherine Bullock (2007) proclaims that veiled women challenged the settlers’ claims of knowledge: “They could not be seen, but were seeing” (6). Their disguise, therefore, made them resistant to control: “What could not be seen, grasped as a spectacle, could not be controlled” (6). Bullock explains that the European need to see these women drove many painters and photographers to expose them to the gaze in their paintings and photographs (6). For Bullock, the veil provided colonised Muslim women with empowerment, and this was why it was attacked as a symbol of cultural degradation (6).

The colonial interest in the veil led to the politicisation of the veil as an emblem of national resistance against imperialism. Muslim women’s bodies are located at the centre
of the battle between Islam and colonisation; the veiled woman represents an Islamic victory, and the unveiled one represents its defeat. In “Algeria Unveiled” (1965), Fanon argues that the French settlers’ main thought was that “if we want to destroy the structure of Algerian society, its capacity for resistance, we must first of all conquer the women: we must go and find them behind the veil where they hide themselves and in the houses where the men keep them out of sight” (38). The settlers felt threatened by women’s concealment, which distanced those women away from the settlers’ scrutinising eye. Fanon continues, saying that the enigma of the veil was deciphered within the French logic as a symbol of aggression and humiliation practiced by “sadistic and vampirish” Algerian men against their women (38). Liberating these women became a main aim of the French settlers (43). To do so, Algeria would have to be introduced to the noble European culture (43). Therefore, Fanon argues, women’s veiling was at the heart of the Algerian national resistance, and for Algeria to achieve independence, its women should keep the veil.

In another colonial context but discussing a similar objectification of women, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her “Can the Subaltern Speak” (1998), refers to the Hindu sati practice, according to which the widow climbs upon her dead husband’s pyre, and to the British endeavour to stop this practice. Here she coins her famous phrase, “white men saving brown women from brown men” (93). Asserting that she opposes the practice, Spivak articulates that her concern is that the widows’ motivation for this sacrifice has never been questioned either by the colonised Hindus or by the British administrative officers (93). As the ritual was banned by the British, some Hindu men adhered to it as a form of resistance to enforced cultural assimilation, forcing more widows to sacrifice themselves (94). Positioning women at the centre of the conflict exacerbated the suffering of both the Algerian and the Hindu women. They were objectified because they were seen as representations of the national identity.

Although these accounts could be seen as specific to the past colonial context, in the postcolonial era, Muslim women continue to suffer in the same way, because of the politicisation of their rights, gender relations and the veil. This politicisation is now undertaken by Western political powers and political Islamic groups simultaneously, with the latter often asserting conservative views regarding women as a core or key to their anti-West struggles. In her article “Islamic Feminism Before and after September 11th”, Cooke demonstrates how the United States anti-Taliban military intervention was accompanied by a campaign to “save” Afghan women from the oppressive Taliban men:

The burqa recalls sati … Imperial logic genders and separates subject peoples so that the men are the Other and the women are civilizable. To defend our universal
civilization we must rescue the women. To rescue the women we must attack these men … the rhetoric of empire conceals race, ethnicity and class so that gender becomes these [peoples’] major defining characteristic (3).

According to Cooke, the interest of the West in “saving” Muslim women provoked a counteraction from religious fundamentalist men to target and oppress women as “border markers”, where the women’s morality was a measurement of the purity of the society (8). Muslim women were not saved by the American-led war; in fact, their suffering has worsened because of the failure to exterminate the fundamentalist militias. As Malalai Joya, in 2005 the youngest woman elected to the Afghan parliament, emphasised in her 2009 article “The Big Lie of Afghanistan” (2009), “Almost eight years after the Taliban regime was toppled, our hopes for a truly democratic and independent Afghanistan have been betrayed by the continued domination of fundamentalists and by a brutal occupation that ultimately serves only American strategic interests in the region” (no pagination). Hence, Joya declared, human rights in Afghanistan could not be gained by an external intervention.

Within this struggle between Western powers and Islamic fundamentalists, calls for social or ideological reform with regard to Muslim women’s rights are manipulated. Islamic feminism offers Muslim women a framework for a resistance of such guardianships. However, as the discussion in chapter 1 will reveal, Islamic feminists’ debates over religious agency and the possibility of engaging with textual traditions in the modern day range widely. Burdened by the imperialist strategies of using women’s liberation as a vessel for colonisation, Islamic feminists’ engagements with secular views of human rights must be justified and continually affirmed as a development of the Islamic ones. As will be discussed in chapter 1, this burden has led some Islamic feminists, such as Saba Mahmood, to openly consider feminist attempts to reread sacred texts as contributing to imperialist agendas (“Secular, Hermeneutics, and Empire” 335).

In her controversial book Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism (1999), Haideh Mogissi disputes the possibility of achieving an Islamic feminist movement: “How could a religion which is based on gender hierarchy be adopted as the framework for struggle for gender democracy and women’s equality with men? And if Islam and feminism are compatible, which one has to operate within the framework of the other?” (126) Mogissi argues that in order to gain the right to equality, Muslim women should only engage in the spiritual and cultural dimensions of Islam and should not submit to Islamic Law or Shari’a (142). Mogissi’s last proposition aims to contest the “Islamic” in “Islamic feminism”, and she has rightly been criticised by Cooke for her failure to perceive the difference between
Islam and Islamic fundamentalism (58). However, despite this reductive view, Mogissi’s reference to spirituality as offering a wealth of resources for debates over women’s rights is sound. That is, as the critical reading of the works under scrutiny will make clear, spirituality, or more precisely, Sufism comprises variable ways of engaging with the textual traditions and of perceiving agency. This study engages with Sufism as providing a possible liberation of Islamic feminism from this historical burden. Firstly, Sufism provides an alternative engagement with the past. This is because it permits the articulation of the spiritual experience through the use of the apocalypse and historical archetypes. Secondly, it provides an emancipating perspective on individuals, mostly women, as spiritual entities who embody the divine. Within Ibn ‘Arabi’s Sufism, women occupy the highest spiritual position as theophanies or reflections of God. Thirdly, Ibn ‘Arabi’s Sufism stresses intuitional knowledge as the only way towards the divine and sees individuality as a fundamental condition of achieving this knowledge. The analytical chapters will investigate these features in detail with regard to the artistic works under scrutiny. This study deals with the writers’ and cinematic director’s Sufism as a system of belief that monopolises motifs and dimensions that are deeply religious. Sufism shapes the authors’ views of the textual religious traditions and the resultant models of agency.

2. Religious History and Postcolonial Religious Subjects:

Modern religious history writing centralises Christianity, and to some extent Judaism, as champions of modernity. Although modernity departed from religion through secularism, its relation to religion is not terminated. This means that parts of the world that are affiliated with religions other than Christianity and Judaism are estranged from modernity. This is particularly valid for postcolonial religious subjects who, according to these historians, are still living in the pre-modern phase. This section investigates the views of two prominent philosophers, Georg William Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) and Marcel Gauchet (1946–), in order to uncover the religious background of modernity and to facilitate an understanding of the situation of religious postcolonial subjects. This is followed by a discussion of the influence of colonial ideological aggression on the postcolonial ideological structure through a reading of Edward Said (1935–2003), Frantz Fanon (1925–1961), Robert J. C. Young (1950–) and others.

Hegel understands religion as a continuous journey undertaken by the human consciousness in search of God. In his Phenomenology of Spirit (1807), he elucidated that, throughout this journey, the consciousness develops its ability to attain knowledge and to reflect on itself and the world. Religion, therefore, is created by the human consciousness. Hegel examines consciousness, of the self and of the world, as the starting
point for understanding religion. He elucidates that religions can be understood depending on the way the consciousness approaches what he calls the “absolute Being”, meaning divine knowledge (58). Consciousness, for Hegel, passes through many stages starting from “sense-certainty”, which is a primary stage in which the consciousness derives knowledge from the physical characteristics of objects, assuming that these objects have no other reality but the one revealed to the senses (58). This knowledge is not a result of an examination of an interrelated and complex web of realities but occurs because the object’s materiality, or “simple immediacy”, establishes its “truth” (59). Hegel appropriates Immanuel Kant’s sceptical notion of the knowledge of “things-in-themselves” to distinguish lower levels of consciousness from higher levels. In his Critique of Pure Reason (1781), Kant insinuates that humans’ knowledge of objects is limited by their physical recognition of them and that these objects have realities which are not apparent to the human (128).

From the first stage of consciousness emerges the stage of “Perception”, in which the consciousness realises that the object of knowledge has a reality and qualities which are universal to other beings (67). The “singular” reality, discovered in the “sense-certainty”, is replaced by multiple, interrelated realities; the object of knowledge becomes “the thing with many properties” (67). In the following stage, “Understanding”, the consciousness is not satisfied with the object of knowledge as a “true” epistemological resource but, expecting complex and invisible properties, attempts to approach “the Notion of the Truth” (80). At this stage, the consciousness is aware of its inability to have a complete grasp of this Truth (80). The recognition of the independence of the Truth from the human consciousness allows two types of beings to surface, “being-for-self” and “being-for-another”, or the consciousness of the human being and of God (80). The unity between the two, as Hegel argues, permits the human to attain the highest level of knowledge through revelation (82, 459).

Associating Christianity with the highest form of consciousness, that is “Understanding”, Hegel sees in Christianity the most refined religion. He argues that Christianity constitutes God as partly human and partly divine; therefore, it offers the unique experience of the knowledge of God via revelation: “This religion is the consciousness of the divine Being that it is Spirit. For Spirit is the knowledge of oneself in the externalization of oneself; the being that is the movement of retaining its self-identity in its otherness” (459). Revelation happens as a result of this mutual recognition between the spirit and itself or the divine and the human. Hegel sees in this “speculative knowledge” a reconciliation between reason and religion (461). Therefore, he sees in
Christianity a religion which supports reason, meaning that it is the religion which paves the way for modern civilisation.

Hegel explains how other religions which preceded Christianity, “natural religion” and “religion in the form of art”, epitomise early stages of consciousness. In “natural religions”, the consciousness approaches God by means of natural phenomena or beings such as light, plants or animals (416). In aesthetic religions, the consciousness views God in the image of man, because of its new arrival at “self-consciousness” (424). This image, produced physically in the work of art, for example with respect to the Greek gods, is “unchangeable” and passive (425). However, Hegel does not seem to favour these religions, due to their inability to achieve peace or reconciliation with reason.

Hegel’s writing on religion focuses on the way humanity establishes its own perception of God. Undertaking a more chronological path, Marcel Gauchet benefits from Hegel’s study of religion as an aspect of perception in order to study the development of religions. Gauchet does not delve deeper into the consciousness as a site of religious experience but investigates the temporal and spatial dimensions of humans’ relation to God. In his study of the history of religions entitled The Disenchantment of the World (1997), Gauchet argues that religion has deeply influenced the evolution of human civilisations. For him, the development of human civilisations is dependent on their relationship to the past, while both the past and humans’ relationship to it are shaped by these religions. He engages with the “primitive religions”, which he recognises as the earliest forms of religions and as inhabiting “fully civilised societies”, as the source of human civilisations throughout history (8). However, he consciously uses the term “primitive” to assert their “otherness” and exclusion from history (8). The most distinctive feature of “primitive religions” is that they are “stateless” (8). According to Gauchet, these religions situate the past in a situation par excellence as providing meaning and world order: “The whole framework encompassing the practices of the living had their origins in a founding past that ritual both revitalizes as an inexhaustible source and reaffirms in its sacred otherness” (24). These religions established civilisations in which humans’ agricultural successes were not attributed to human abilities but were explained through “disposition” or “indebtedness” to gods who had been known and worshipped since ancient times (24). Religions emphasised humanity’s vulnerabilities to these gods and to the natural phenomena which these gods could inflict upon humanity (24). By resisting the development of human activities, these religions ensured that all members of the society occupied a uniform distance from the gods and the sacred past (25). For Gauchet, these
religions associated peace with the basal nature of civilisation and with a sense of equality, or more precisely, equal vulnerability, among the people (25).

A critical feature of these religions was that by implying this uniform distance from the past, they established societies which revolved around a collective attitude of welfare: “You can certainly risk your life, but you cannot question the very principle of coexistence” (27). This perspective was, of course, undermining the power, will and desire of individuals, and for Gauchet, although this factor contributed to the disempowerment of Judaism and Christianity in post-medieval Europe (34), it did not disturb the “primitive religions” until the advent of the state, or the “State”, as he writes it. In the Axial age, the state established itself as an “embodiment” of “the religious Other” or the gods: “With the State’s appearance, the religious Other actually returns to the human sphere. While it of course retains its exteriority relative to the State, the religious penetrates and is embodied in the State” (35). This altered humanity’s relationship to the gods and desacralised the past (34). The state divided human beings into rulers and subjects, with the former group closer to the gods than the latter (35). The relation to the gods was now institutionalised through the state’s mediation between the people and the gods (36).

Gauchet’s narrative of religious history was criticised by Charles Taylor for leaving the fundamental question of divinity, or the existence of God, unaddressed (xiv). However, Gauchet’s view of the role of the state in the evolution of “primitive religions” is deeply informative. Political Islamic groups, which will be defined in detail in due course, claim legitimacy by connecting themselves to the sacred past and declaring themselves as the only valid mediators to this past. The association of religion with politics is taken for granted, often by the recollection that Prophet Muhammed was a political leader, and any dispute of this conviction is considered a dispute against God, prompting accusations of excommunication or takfir (Haykel 48). Political bodies continue to assume tremendous powers by incorporating themselves into the religion, and Muslim societies continue to suffer the consequences of the association of politics and religion.

Whereas Islam resides at the premodern stage, as Gauchet argues (24), in Judeo-Christian Europe, the story of religion is not finished. The two religions’ engagement with God differs from that of their predecessors. They necessitate God’s transcendence and His existence in the present rather than the past (51). This change is followed by internalising one’s relation to God through “intimate connection” and the search for divine wisdom in the material world (53). The abolishing of God’s immanence and His detachment from the world makes the world an object to the human, who now has a direct access to Him (53). This religious connection establishes the “autonomy of human reason” (53). Humanity
begins to create its own reality: “The wholesale reconstruction of human space under the influence of God’s paradoxical absolutization/withdrawal is the hidden source behind the expanding fragmented components of our democratic, individualizing, state-based, historical, technological, capitalist world” (103). The centre, previously occupied by God, is made available for the individual, who, through his/her ability of self-constitution, is expected to achieve agency: “Entering the age of individualism means leaving the age of the religious, where both dependency on the whole and indebtedness to the other are simultaneously relinquished” (27). The detachment from the past and the reformation of the human as an autonomous being are perceived by Gauchet to be features of the “Post-religious society” (206).

For Gauchet, then, the human consciousness is the final site of God. When God becomes closer to the human than to the world, and the human’s religious experience becomes internal and individual, the human gains power over nature and history. Considering Gauchet’s narrative of religious history, the world order which is established by modernity is a result of the evolution of Judaism and Christianity. The question to be asked here is what the relationship of other societies is, outside Judeo-Christian Europe, to this world order. In other words, in societies where the religious attachment to the past remains unchanged and the collective social structure is sound, how can the practical power provided to the human over history be related to? In Islamic societies, for instance, the collective responsibility to maintain the welfare of the society is a crucial part of the belief. As chapter 1 will discuss in detail, debates on agency within Islamic scholarship and within Islamic feminism in particular revolve around the relationship of the individual to the collective. The view of the past as sacred and effective in creating the present remains unchanged in Islamic societies. As explored in chapter 1, the Islamic feminist debate on the relation to the textual tradition shows a divide in the way these texts can be related to in the modern day. These texts were established in relation to a society in the seventh century CE, a society which comprised certain perspectives on gender relations constituted by specific economic and political factors intrinsic to it. Whereas some feminists see in this social specificity an object for examination in order to “historicise” these texts and conclude laws which are suitable for modern-day gender relations, others refuse such development and assert the perpetual efficiency of this past.

The historical association of modernity with Judeo-Christian European civilisation emphasises the alienation of religious postcolonial subjects from modernity. The colonised are subjects of Eurocentric history writing. Modern history writing establishes the religious and the colonised as subordinate to “the historical man”. In his book White Mythologies:
Writing History and the West (1990), Robert J. C. Young notes that Western history, which is formulated as a product of man’s actions, witnessed the conceptualisation of women and the ‘native’ as others in Western humanism (Young 161). The writing of history positions the ‘native’ other as a signifier of the boundaries of Western civilisation. This writing legitimises Western civilisation as the only valid human system by presenting the depravity of the other. Young highlights how such presentations solidify the position of “First World” civilisation and its ideological productions (159). History thus becomes the vessel of colonisation for modern humanism. Young explains that while Western humanism leads to rationalising the colonisation of native others in the name of “saving” them, calls for decolonisation, as in Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth (1961, 1990), promote anti-humanism as the basis for subverting Western hegemony over the colonised (161). Anti-humanism in this sense, as Young explains, is not a rejection of human ethics but an interrogation of the way the notion of humanism is utilised to conceptualise the rational man—the Western prototype of the civilised individual (161). For anti-humanists, Young continues, humanism supports colonisation by justifying the uprooting of the colonised from their own cultures but not permitting the complete substitution of the culture of the mother land (162). Young’s account offers a profound examination of one of the ways in which colonisation led to neo-colonisation: Colonisation paved the way for the neglect of the colonised culture that is seen as unworthy of survival. To trace the roots of this cultural hegemony further to the colonial era, one may examine Fanon’s view of Western humanism. The coloniser, according to Fanon, views the colonised with distaste; however, he attempts to appear reasonable by “inviting the sub-men to become human” (131). This invitation is formulated by the coloniser’s will to position himself as the perfect model of civilisation (131). The coloniser asserts his civilised self through the alleged degradation of the colonised. This tendency can be attributed to the coloniser’s overzealousness for the newly established Judeo-Christian civilisation. However, this cultural hegemony is not diminished by decolonisation. Humanism continues to connote Western norms, enforcing Western domination of the ideology of the postcolonial world.

Through such attempts to establish an ideological basis for colonisation, the colonised are denied access to their own histories. In Culture and Imperialism (1994), Edward Said discusses the ways in which colonialism and neo-colonialism affected their subjects’ sense of the present and future. Said clarifies that colonial subjects may need to address the past through debates “about influence, about blame and judgement, about present actualities and future priorities” (1). For the colonised, the present can be informed by the cultural and military violence committed in the past. The colonised must interrogate the colonial experience and search for interpretations of colonial motivations and
attributions because the story of past colonisation has not yet ceased; instead, it unfolds through the ideological patterns of the postcolonial present. Said explains that “the meaning of the imperial past is not totally contained within it, but has entered the reality of hundreds of millions of people, where its existence as a shared memory and as a highly conflictual texture of culture, ideology, and policy still exercises tremendous force” (11). An understanding of the colonial past paves the way for comprehending contemporary postcolonial ideologies.

Postcolonial discourse is permeated by the Eurocentric perspective of history, which complicates the situation of postcolonial spiritual subjects. For example, Fanon and Jean-Paul Sartre saw in mysticism a form of delusion and irrationality. The neglect of the mystical dimension in their analysis reflects their failure to understand different levels of reality through the eyes of the colonised: For the spiritual colonised, the mystical world is as real as the material world. Fanon sees spiritual practice as an alternative to the violence that he advocates in facing colonial aggression (44). He notes how in African colonies, spiritual dances, which exhibit a reciprocal influence with local religions, such as Voodoo and Islam, form a critical expression of “the native’s emotional sensibility exhausting itself in dances which are more or less ecstatic” (44). During the zar, a spiritual dance, the colonised dances to detach himself from reality by allowing spirits to possess him (45). Although such practices help the colonised to survive the hardships of colonisation, Fanon sees in them a disavowal of reality that absorbs the rage of the colonised and lengthens the period of colonisation (45). In his preface to Fanon’s book, Jean-Paul Sartre states that although the colonised opted to practice such spiritualties to protect his identity from colonial alienation, he cannot refuse the colonial culture because he simply does not have the leisure to choose (17). Fanon and Sartre did not acknowledge the religious motivation of these spiritual practices; Sartre sees them as the deliberate undertaking of a trajectory of “madness” (17). The indigenous belief in the mystical is dismissed by some postcolonial intellectuals because they see mysticism as a form of submission.

Meanwhile, the ideological struggle of neo-colonisation is amplified by the conflict between the secular and the religious. According to Aparna Devare (2009) the imperial writing of history which is fashioned by modernity calls for a complete disjunction between history and religion and a rewriting of religion in secular historical terms (Devare 47). This rewriting results in an alienation of “non-modern” ideologies based on religious convictions (Devare 48). Therefore, modern humanism, based on secular rationalisation, attempts to neutralise—if not neglect—the religious aspects of indigenous cultures. Young explains:
The formation of the ideas of human nature, humanity and the universal qualities of the human mind as the common good of an ethical civilization occurred at the same time as those particularly violent centuries in the history of the world now known as the era of Western colonialism. The effect of this was to dehumanize the various subject-peoples. (160)

The basic features of civilisation are tightly linked to Western cultural practices. Meanwhile, the colonised subjects’ faith in local religion and traditions is deepened by their need for identity and strength to face their presumed otherness in the context of Western humanism, which positions them as strategic objects of neo-colonialism. This emphasises the need for a questioning of Western humanist values, which are homogenised as the individual’s rights in a natural and universal form. The failure to engage in such questioning may, as Said previously argued, perpetuate the alienation of postcolonial subjects from the future of modernity. Such an interrogation is essential to overcome the polarity in postcolonial ideologies that continues to cause the estrangement of religious subjects because their beliefs do not conform to secular patterns of thought. For religious subjects, this interrogation should start with reconsidering their history.

The predominance of Western historicity is integral to its rationality. This, as Jordan Yearsley argues, makes its continuity indisputable; it is “objectified as not a mystical alterity, but as a decidedly graspable event bound to happen in the not-so-distant-future” (5). Yearsley attempts to justify his claims, adding that Western bureaucracy is based on “efficiency and productivity” designed to achieve certain objectives (Yearsley 4). It divides time into small units, each of which is assigned to a single task (4). Western calculations of the future are certain because modern historic bureaucracy guarantees the success of the future through the material progress of the present. In fact, Yearsley’s consideration shows how secularism is predicted to remain the basis of future development, such that traditional people will continue to live in alienation. Yearsley’s argument is based on one notion: Western practical concepts of time, which also benefit the writing of history, establish the West’s supreme position as the leader of civilisation. For him, Muslim colonised subjects’ otherness in the context of modernity does not occur because of colonisation and neo-colonisation but instead because of the subjects’ attachment to Islamic tradition, which, according to him, advocates the depreciation of the present and negligence of advancement (9). In fact, Yearsley’s categorisation of the secular approach to civilisation as being practical and fruitful and the religious approach as being neither is simplistic and historically inaccurate.
What Yearsley does not consider is the deep contrast between secular and religious views of civilisation. As the study of Aboulela’s work will elucidate in chapter 2, a return to history is badly needed for religious individuals to refute the Eurocentric normative aspects of civilisation via an examination of Islamic historical approach to it. However, history writing itself is dominated by secular historiographical ideologies. Historians’ analyses of past events, which are formed from their own viewpoints, may result in their ideological control over history. Michel de Certeau remarks that history writing is akin to the creation of a story (8). The historian examines the material resources for historical facts and attempts to connect these facts via speculations (9). Although this story cannot be ascertained as completely true, the story is still considered historically valid, because its subjects are distanced temporally from modern man (5). In The Vision of Islam (1994), Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick highlight that history writing requires the utilisation of reason to “divide, dissect, and take apart”—a process that requires the application of the historian’s own perspective (323). This becomes particularly problematic when this history becomes active in shaping the present because the study of history may allow the anticipation of certain present events through reference to historical evidence (323). Philip Sheldrake illustrated that history writing, in its modern form, is a response to the “Enlightenment model of history,” which endeavours to examine the past by establishing “a notion of its inherent distance and difference from the present and yet, at the same time, a belief in the possibility of achieving objective knowledge of it” (16). To achieve this objectivity, modern historiography relies on contemporary, scientific measures of reality, implying that the past events that conform to these measures are established as historical facts (17). As a result, rational methodologies of perceiving historic realities may neglect many incidents of religious history due to the lack of compliance between their mystical dimension and modern convictions.

The influence that such historiographical approaches have on religious history is exacerbated by the standardisation of Western historiographical concepts. Dipesh Chakrabarty notes that, many years after decolonisation, non-Western historians continue to adopt Western methods of historiography because histories are written by colonisers (29). While the past is written selectively, the future can be structured through the strategic plans of the present, as determined by the West. In other words, Western modernity circumscribes human authority over time, and those who exist in the periphery of this modernity do not have histories of their own.

The postcolonial ideological predicament is deeply related to the historical one. The predominance of Western civilisation designed the fate of colonised subjects and continues
to do so. Before elucidating the way Sufism has been adopted in postcolonial literary attempts to react to historical alienation, a brief overview of the historical and theological background of Sufism will be conducted in order to establish an adequate knowledge of this school of thought.

3. Background on the Theology of Sufism:

In her abundant study of Sufism entitled Mystical Dimensions of Islam (1975), Annemarie Schimmel describes three Sufi schools. First, “ascetic orthodox” Sufism emerged in the early period of Islam; its followers, such as Fuḍayl ibn ʿIyād (107-187 AH, 726-803 CE), preferred solitude and abstinence to perfect their complete devotion (36-7). Second, “moderate Sufism” arose, which she believes was specially constituted and promoted by Abbasid caliphs and scholars for the sake of introducing a form of Sufism that assisted common people to deviate from what they saw as a radical example of Sufism set by Maḥṣūr Alhallaj (244-309 AH, 858-922 CE) (83). Third, “popular Sufism,” a hierarchical Sufism with theories on sainthood, evolved in the ninth and tenth century (CE) as a result of the integration of Shi’a and Sufi teachings (82). Schimmel does not dwell on the differences among these schools but refers to them sparsely throughout her study.

Another differentiation is undertaken by Abd Al-Qadir Mahmood in his 1977-1967 book Al-Falsāfa AṣṢūfiya Fī Al-Islam [Sufi Philosophy in Islam]. In this study, Mahmood pictures Sufism as a phenomenon that has existed since the beginning of Islam and extends to the present. For him, the integration of Islamic schools led Sufism to permeate many Islamic schools, including those commonly seen as adverse to Sufism. Due to its extended historical and geographical influence, Sufism comprises a wide variety of ideologies. These are divided by Mahmood, via tracing the orientations of acclaimed Islamic scholars, into three schools: Salafi–Sufism, Sunni–Sufism, and Philosophical Sufism.

Salafi–Sufism (first to fifth century AH, eighth to eleventh century CE. [Ibn Taymiyyah’s influence extends this period to the eighth century AH, fourteenth CE]) is characterised by an espousal of spirituality, a complete submission to Qurān and Hadith and an avoidance of philosophical debates on religious matters (94). The main figures of this school are Aḥmad bin Ḥanbal (164-241 AH, 780-855 CE) and Ahmad Ibn Taymiyyah (661-1263, 1263-1328 CE); a recall of their names resonates with orthodox religiosity both in the past and the present. Such an impression originates from the resistance of the two imams to ideological innovations promoted by authoritarian caliphs, which caused their imprisonment and suffering. Ibn Taymiyyah is often seen as a principal opponent of Sufism. However, as Muhammad Abdul Haq Anṣārī explains in his article “Ibn Taymiyyah and Sufism” (1985), Ibn Taymiyyah engaged critically with Sufism, dividing it, like
Schimmel and Mahmood, into three types. First are those who have not experienced fana, annihilation, or sukur, intoxication, but subject their spirituality to the sacred texts; he approved of this group and called its mystics mashâ‘ikh Al-Islam, or Sheiks of Islam (2). The second group comprises mystics who, whilst experiencing intoxication, committed an act or uttered a saying against Shari’a, but repented afterward (2). Ibn Taymiyyah did not rebuke this cohort but instead sympathised with them (2). Third are the Sufis, whom he criticised for promoting notions or ideologies that are in conflict with Shari’a, such as hulûl and wahdat al-wujûd (2).²

In the present day, the two imams bin Ḥanbal and Ibn Taymiyyah are referred to as the fathers of contemporary Salafi schools. This makes it difficult to differentiate between contemporary Salafi ideologies and the spiritual Salafism of the two imams. In fact, contemporary Salafi schools follow the two imams in the fields of theology and jurisprudence. With regard to political matters, these schools follow the opinions of contemporary ideologues, such as Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966). Modern-day Salafism involves many schools and sub-schools that vary from quietists to violent extremists, depending on the political stance of their principal ideologue (Haykel 34).

In his chapter on Salafism, entitled “On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action” (2014), Bernard Haykel explains that the term Salafism is originally a reference to Al-salaf Al-Salih which literally means “pious ancestors” and refers to the first three generations of Islam, declared by the prophet to be the best generations: “The best of my community [i.e. Muslims] are my generation, then those who come after them and then those who follow them” (34).³ This term, therefore, grants its followers an aura of purity because they anchor their religiosity to that of the pioneering elite (34). For Salafi scholars, the best understanding of the Qur’an and Hadith is upheld by the Salaf themselves, who either are contemporary companions or were taught by contemporary companions of the Prophet. Salafi attachment to textual evidence, as Haykel explains, shapes modern Salafism’s major features: its scripturalism, which produces a sense of certainty and authority, and its reformist message through “da’wa,” or “call” (37, 47). However, this sense of authority has led some Salafi schools to believe that a refutation of their argument is akin to refuting the text on which the argument is based, thus paving the path for takfîr, or excommunication (36-7).

² hulûl means “indwelling” or “the incarnation of the divine in man” (Schimmel 144). Wahdat al-wujûd will be explained shortly.
³ In Sahih Muslim, the Hadith is as follows: “A’isha reported that a person asked the Prophet Muhammed as to who amongst the people were the best. He said: Of the generation to which I belong, then of the second generation (generation adjacent to my generation), then of the third generation (generation adjacent to the second generation)” (31:6159).
Politically speaking, Salafi schools are broadly grouped by Haykel into three categories. The first are the terrorist groups that view themselves as Salafi Jihadis (47); these groups have a violent tendency towards all political orders and aim to establish a caliphate (48). They adopt the views of Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), a Muslim Brotherhood theorist, on hakimiyya (“God’s sovereignty”) and jahiliyya (“idolatrous condition”), views that encourage violence against modern states, including Islamic ones, because of their failure to place God’s rule at the centre of their political and legal systems (48). In the chapter “The Transformation of a Radical Concept” (2014), Joas Wagemakers explains that two members of this group, Juhayman Al-Útaybi (1936-1980) and, later, Abu Muhammed al-Maqdisi (1959), formulated the concept of al-wala wa-l-bará’, literally “loyalty and disavowal” (a controversial concept among pre-modern Salafi scholars that was refused by bin Ḥanbal as bid’ah) in a political fashion, to connote “loyalty to the worship of God alone and disavowal of polytheism (shirk) and polytheists (mushrikun) and ‘showing enmity to them,’” paving the way for its use among radical militias to legitimise suicide bombing (Wagemakers 90-1). The act of violence under this notion is always preceded by takfîr of the targeted people or political party.

The second are political activists, or harakis, who are influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood’s political views in their attempts to gain political power (48). This group comprises non-violent political activists who are present in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Kuwait; they are known as Sahawis, “The Awakening Ones,” or Sururis, the followers of Muhammed ibn Surur, a former member of the Muslim Brotherhood (1938-2016) (49). The term Sahawis refers to the Sahwa movement, or the “religious revival” of 1979, which formulated the contemporary religious atmosphere of Saudi Arabia. The Sahwa, as Stéphane Lacroix explains in his book Awakening Islam (2011), culminated with the violent siege of the Meccan Holy mosque by the Salafi Jihadi Juhayman Al-Útaybi (38). However, its seeds were sown by the contact between Wahhabism and the Muslim Brotherhood (38). The subjugation of members of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Syria in the 1960s and 1970s led many of them to flee to Saudi Arabia, where they took over the education system and spread their ideas in a Wahhabi outlook (42-8). Although this trend is generally a non-violent one, some of its scholars encourage the practice of violence to maintain their views of the purely religious state (Haykel 50). The variation in this group depends on the degree of influence of either the Wahhabi pro-state ‘ulama; political non-violent followers of Al-Banna, or Bannaists; or Qutbists, radical followers of Qutub (Lacroix 52). As Lacroix explains, the three schools have different interests:

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4 *Bid’ah* means innovation. In religious context, *bid’ah* bears negative meanings as it indicate an idea, action or utterance that is not derived from the Qur’án or Hadîth.
Wahhabism is purely religious, and its battles are against the bid’ah of other schools; Bannaism is anti-colonialist and anti-Western; and Qutbism is antagonistic towards “godless regimes” (52). In Sahawi views, Wahhabism is the source of theology and jurisprudence, whereas political matters are dealt with through the association of Bannaists and Qutbists, though the latter soon became the predominant ideology of the movement (52).

The third are the Quietist Jamis, the followers of Muhammed ibn Aman Al-Jami (1930-1996), and the Madkhalis, followers of Rabi’ Al-Madkhali (1931-) (Haykel 49). The Jamis and Madkalis stress the importance of maintaining obedience to the ruler, or wali al-amr, to avoid the evils of uprising, or fitna (49). Scholars who follow this Salafi tendency can be found in Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and other countries (49). This group consists of quietists but not pacifists because their relation to power may induce their participation in wars to support the ruler (49). This school is mainly known as “Scholastic Salafism,” or al-Salafiyya al-ilmiyya, and is often criticised by political groups for its increasing concern with debating rituals while neglecting more important issues (i.e. politics) that threaten the religion (49). The political positions of contemporary Salafi schools across the three categories seem to formulate their ideologies and distance them from the original perspectives of bin Ḥanbal and Ibn Taymiyyah. Although the two scholars did not seek active or revolutionary political engagements, they suffered in their defence of what they believed to be the truth. However, contemporary Salafism seems to stress exclusionary concepts and violent practices. This violence is stimulated by their anti-West struggle.

The second of Mahmood’s Sufi categories is Sunni–Sufism (first to sixth century AH, eighth to twelfth century CE). It is seen favourably by Mahmood as featuring a moderate form of Sufism, acting as a middle ground to alleviate the radical extremism of the other two schools (151). For him, Salafi–Sufism’s disputes with the schools of Ash’ariyyah and Mu’tazilah led to its adoption of extremely literal views regarding God’s features, or Sifat (151). Sunni–Sufism, for him, comprises scholars who belonged to the Ash’ariyyah school and whose symbolic perception of Sifat guarded religion against the rationalist Mu’tazilah and the literalist Salafism (151). Mahmood indicates that this school has a productive engagement with philosophical issues that does not defy textual traditions. In particular, he explains, Muhammad al-Gazali (450-505 AH, 1058-1111 CE) propagated a form of Sufism that sees in the Qur’an answers to legal and metaphysical issues. This school developed its asceticism from moderate Shi‘ism, and both are characterised by their sadness, or ḥuzun, about the loss of the Prophet, his family and his companions (152-3). For Shi‘ism, the Prophet’s family are deserving of the same respect paid to the Prophet.
himself because they inherited his spirituality. The murder of the Prophet’s grandson Hussein by the Umayyads in 681 CE is a key event in the history of Shi‘ism, and Hussein’s murder continues to be mourned every year.

Philosophical Sufism (third to ninth century AH, ninth to thirteenth century CE) was established by famous figures including Mañoır Alhallaj, who introduced the notion of hulūl (literally “incarnation”), and Muhammād Ibn ‘Arabi (558-638 AH, 1265-1240 CE), whose main philosophy is waḥdat al-wujūd, or “unity of being” (respectively, 359, 485). This philosophy is explained in Oxford Dictionary of Islam as “postulates that God and His creation are one, since all that is created preexisted in God's knowledge and will return to it, making mystical union with God possible” (333). Philosophical Sufism tends to hold a distinctively liberal perspective on textual authority. This makes it the subject of criticism by Salafi schools both contemporary and medieval. Mahmood sees these philosophies as having pagan non-Islamic origins, attributing the former to an integration of Greek philosophies and Oriental Christianity (362) and the latter to Plato (490). Overall, Mahmood does not represent these schools as monolithic entities. The ideological exchange between their sub-schools makes it impossible to achieve neat delineations. The temporal periods indicated by the author instead are indicative of the time in which these schools flourished at the hands of their established scholars. They are not markers of the beginning or end of their popularity, which extends well beyond these time frames.

Having illustrated the historical background of Sufism, the following section will discuss the current situation of Sufi literature in order to locate the artistic works under scrutiny within the general context.

4. Sufism in Postcolonial Literary and Cinematic Narratives:

It is clear now that postcolonial ideologies suffer from the consequences of colonisation. This suffering is the catalyst of Sufi narrative both in literature and film. Ziad Elmarsafy, whose Sufism in the Contemporary Arabic Novel (2012) has been informative to this study, attributes the growing popularity of Sufism in Arabic literature in the latter half of the twentieth century to the prevalence of frustration incurred by the overwhelming failures of modern ideological and political movements, thus aborting every hope for systems based on respect for human rights and individuality (6). For Wail Hassan, as his Tayeb Salih: Ideology and the Craft of Fiction (2003) makes explicit, this failure indicates the bitter reality that the Arab past has separated from the Western one (130). The two pasts were thought to accommodate each other in transforming the postcolonial nation states to follow the Western model (130). However, Hassan continues, the civil wars in Lebanon, Sudan and Algeria and all other wars that continue to tear through postcolonial Arab territories
prove that nation–states remain alien to the social, tribal and religious structure of these territories (130). This violence prompts literary adoption of Sufism in an attempt to re-read the past and to create it anew. The past here is, as Elmarsafy reminds his readers, “very carefully chosen . . . ironically – or perhaps usefully – situated centuries in the past” (7). The persistent need for the recall of this past—the past of religious, philosophical or literary icons—is necessitated by the absence of a stable identity. This has affected the chronological sequence of the narrative, as Hassan indicates: “linear time all but disappears: past, present, and future merge indistinguishably in the uncertain spaces of memory, dream, hallucination, mystical experience, and intersubjectivity” (133). Being torn apart by alternating struggles and oppressed by contesting authoritarian powers, Elmarsafy continues, the Sufi writer is in constant quest for a “contact with the [divine and human] Other” (5). This contact promises the “survival” of the writer/Sufi’s individuality in such dilemmas by permitting the transcendence of the restrictions created and imposed by the authoritarian powers (5). For the Sufi writer, individuality is crucial for spirituality, and the threat to it is resisted by spiritual and mystical means.

Sufi writing accommodates the expression of this “contact” due to its elusive nature. As Adonis, Ali Ahmad Sa’id, in Sufism and Surrealism (1995, 2005), described the Sufi narrative as follows: “Everything in it appears to be a symbol, a dream or a sign. Night is not night so much as an allusion to another light, and death is not death so much as another life” (119). The elusiveness of Sufi expression is part of the writer’s interaction with the mystical: “When the poet enters a world of transformations, he can leave it only by transformative writing: waves of illuminating images, which do not bear scrutiny by reasonable or logical means, and through which reality itself is transformed into a dream” (114). This “transformative” narrative comprises an infusion of the mystical with the profane in a way that perceives material objects and phenomena as reflections of mystical concepts. In particular, the Sufi ideology of waḥdat al-wujūd encourages use of such symbols as assertions of the spirituality and unity of the universe. As this study of the novels and film will elucidate, the “contact” with the divine is symbolised through such rhetoric. The expression of this mystical experience is deeply mystified because of the infinite entity of the divine that it attempts to depict and the limits language imposes on the Sufi articulation. Adonis quoted al-Niffari’s saying: “the more you see, the narrower the means of expressing it” (95). Sufi elusive style is profoundly related to the view of language as inexpressive of the mystical experience. This style of writing is widely adopted by writers who are influenced by the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi because of his perspective of knowledge, gnosis or ‘ilm, as elitist.
The ability of Sufi images and motifs to produce such imaginative possibilities has gained them popularity among postcolonial depictions of the ideological predicament. The dire need to recall the past through Sufi rhetoric and the emphasis on the mystical as a space that enables this recall makes “the apocalypse” a useful paradigm. The apocalypse, as Frank Kermode elucidates in The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction (1970), provides “a concord of imaginatively recorded past and imaginatively predicted future achieved on behalf of us, who remain ‘in the middest’” (8). Kermode confirms that the apocalypse as an imminent threat emerges through the fin de siècle (literally, “turn of the century”) movement of the nineteenth century (96). The repetitive expectation of apocalypse and the frequent disappointment of these expectations nearly empties it of any meaning. However, as Kermode asserts, modern apocalypse can differ depending on the meaning lent to it: “it is by our imagery of past and present and future, rather than from our confidence in the uniqueness of our crisis, that the character of our apocalypse must be known” (96). In his reading of Kermode’s view of the apocalypse, Elmarsafy indicates that Sufism is seen by many Arab writers as providing a suitable rhetoric for the era of “upheaval” due to its ability to provide a familiar connection to the past (7).

The apocalypse frees the novelist or filmmaker from the restrictions of logic and enables an alternative mode of expression of selfhood. The apocalypse can sometimes be remembered rather than created through an archetypal recall of certain historical incidents of dilemmas that befell spiritual individuals. Alternatively, as the examination of Aboulela’s fiction will reveal in chapter 2, the apocalypse can be imagined as a future solution to the predicament of religious postcolonial subjects living under the reign of Western secular modernity. As the current study illustrates, the apocalypse is imagined because of the sense that secular modernity has usurped not only the present but also the future, as Yearsley’s argument assumes. In the current study, the apocalypse is referred to as an eschatological paradigm that empowers spiritual subjects.

Because of its elusive nature, which weaves magic into reality, Sufi writing is more often than not mistakenly received by literary critics as a manifestation of Magical Realism. Most critical analyses of the texts under scrutiny recapitulate the many problems of such readings in two ways. Firstly, the mystical experiences in Sufi texts are read as forms of magic. Such readings often employ a normative language which describes the mystical experience as an irrational one whose credibility resides solely in its influence on the profane. Secondly, this association essentialises the Sufi style within the borders of Magical Realism, which has led to the implicit assumption that literature which does not
employ elusive writing or which employs it in a different way from Magical Realism is not Sufi.

The first issue is prevalent in the reception of Alem’s texts. Alem’s writings as a Sufi and feminist in a predominantly non-Sufi and patriarchal culture position her literary production to be read as Magical Realist expression, because Magical Realism is commonly seen as the literary vessel suitable for such content in such a context. Zamora and Faris explain that Magical Realism’s ability to subvert existing “boundaries” assists in “resistance to monologic political and cultural structures, a feature that has made the mode particularly useful to writers in postcolonial cultures and, increasingly, to women” (8). Alem’s texts, particularly Fatma, are frequently studied as Magical Realist. An example of these readings is Miriam Cooke’s “Dying to Be Free: Wilderness Writing from Lebanon, Arabia, and Libya” (2007). Cooke starts by describing Alem’s mystical writings as “the occult and the bizarre” to emphasise the radical writing style (17). Cooke then proceeds to read the novel by tracing two levels of narrative, a “realistic level” and “the terrifying maze of fantasy, dreams, and magic” (17, 20). She reads Fatma’s mysticism as follows: “Fatma may truly be the queen of the snake kingdom of Najran, or the fantasy of intimacy with dens of deadly snakes may be Freudian or she may be hallucinating after being beaten” (27-8). Fatma’s transmutation into a serpent and her intimate relations with the snakes are read in chapter 5 of this thesis as hallmarks of Fatma’s mystical advancement. They have profound connotations within Alem’s Sufi discourse. Cooke, however, implies that the experience can only be credible if it has a material manifestation; otherwise, it can be read as an indication of either a psychological issue or a delusion. The skimming of the mystical experience as dependent on the meaning provided to it from the material context results in a sense of prejudice against the mystical experience. This often leads to the depiction of the mystical experience as irrational.

Karma Lochrie, in her book Margery Kempe and the Translations of the Flesh (1991), criticises the reductive critical approaches of female mystical writings, which vary between a sense of “disappointment” that the text does not speak in the audacious and rational way expected by the critic and what she calls “reactions of alarm, pity, and patronizing acceptance” (8-9). The critical reading of mystical texts is influenced by the critic’s ability to acknowledge the mystical and the validity provided to it by the writer. In Cooke’s paper, the spiritual dimension of the transmutation of the protagonist in Fatma is neglected in favour of the feminist one. As a Magical Realist aspect, the transmutation is solely read as a symbol of rebellion against physical oppression. This approach lacks comprehension of the mystical as a spiritual source for agency. The physical transmutation
in Alem’s narrative is related to her perception of the profound unity of the two realms, the mystical and the profane. As the discussion in chapter 5 will make clear, Alem sees the transmutation as a manifestation of this unity.

Alem’s coded literary language and departure from logic are motivated by her belief in the elitism of knowledge as theorised by Ibn ‘Arabi. Khemir, who follows the same Sufi school of thought, represents a similar style of narrative. It is important to note that Khemir’s film reflects a narrative form consolidated through the way the film evolves around the act of storytelling by the main and subordinate characters. Therefore, the discussion of literary style is relevant to this film as well. The film is not limited to its narrative alone because of the visual and audio effects it utilises to channel the mystical experience. As explained earlier, the writer’s or filmmaker’s interaction with the mystical shapes the Sufi literary style they utilise. The elusive style described by Adonis can be found in the work of Khemir and Alem. The complexity of Khemir’s film is not a matter of mystified or layered language but in the way it introduces the viewer to a mystical experience without linguistic depiction. The film channels its revelation visually, leaving the viewer at a loss regarding how such meanings can best be described. Alem’s novels and Khemir’s film introduce their readers and audience to the depicted mystical experience and demand their engagement with it.

The second issue with respect to the critical association of Sufism with Magical Realism is epitomised in the reception of Aboulela’s fiction. Aboulela’s writing is inclined towards a lucid explanatory expression of the spiritual endeavour rather than towards layered allusive or illusionary hints. Present studies of Aboulela’s fictions rarely associate them with Sufism. This is because Aboulela’s style does not function in the same framework as Magical Realism. Her historical narrative in The Kindness of Enemies represents a realistic account of the history of the Sufi Imam Shamil. In this novel as well as in Minaret, her representation of the miraculous incidents is carefully written as EYEwitness accounts. It is located within the characters’ perceptions, rendering Aboulela’s realistic style untouched. She deviates from this style when writing her mystical short stories “Days Rotate” and “Radia’s Carpet”, both of which represent spiritual characters in a post-apocalypse spiritual utopia. These short stories are considered by Claire Chambers as “allusive, but arguably unsuccessful, incursions into the realm of science fiction” (88). Chambers’ description shows the way mystical narratives are easily rejected by critics whenever these narratives do not conform to common critical frameworks. Chambers’ attempt to classify these stories as science fiction SHOWS her failure to approach Sufi texts as such. In order to justify her judgment that these stories are “unsuccessful”, she
explains that: “To some extent these stories depict a Muslim utopia, where banks do not charge interest, angels consort with humans” (88). The two short stories are not read as Magical Realism, because they take place in a heaven-like mystical context; this contradicts the basic structure of Magical Realism, which, according to Zamora and Faris, incorporates the supernatural as an “ordinary matter” to the real body of narrative (2). Because these stories do not comply with Magical Realism, they are neglected as failed attempts at science fiction.

Reading the texts and film under scrutiny within the framework of Sufism, this study proposes that the mystical side of the narrative must be provided with the credibility and the validity intended by the author. This permits the discussion of these texts as well as the depicted spiritual models of religious agency to evolve outside the rigid context of postcolonialism. The investigation will differentiate among the multiple Sufi frameworks represented by the authors and filmmaker. In fact, the Sufi style is correlative to the Sufi school of thought to which these writers belong. Aboulela’s fiction centralises the textual tradition as an authority which defines the legitimate spiritual endeavour, hence, her realistic style and conservative feminist discourse. Aboulela’s emphasis on the scholastic and political powers granted to the figure of the Imam explicates, as chapter 2 will elucidate, her belief in a form of Sufism which is inclusive of these dimensions. On the other hand, Khemir’s and Alem’s depictions of knowledge and of the human are found to reflect traces of Ibn ‘Arabi’s notion of wahdat al-wujūd. In their use of Wujudi Sufism, they employ variable Sufi concepts related to Ibn ‘Arabi’s philosophies, such as the theophany, which centralises women as a reflection of God’s knowledge.

Taking into account Kecia Ali’s articulation of Islamic feminism as a fertile field for developing Islamic ideologies (153), chapter 1 of this thesis considers Islamic feminists’ various approaches to tackling textual traditions. The discussion attempts to shed light on the influence of the struggle between the religious and the secular that permeates the conceptualisation of religious agency in Islamic feminism. The chapter explores the problematic issue of conceptualising religious agency with the indispensable presence of secular history in modern humanism. It then investigates how this issue has affected Islamic feminists’ engagement with Islamic textual traditions. This investigation considers not only the ability to achieve such critical engagement with the texts but also the inability to do so. This chapter refers frequently to the positions of Aboulela, Khemir and Alem in the debate, explicating their views of knowledge as innate both to their feminist positions and the literary and cinematic strategies they employ. The chapter’s function is to locate their depictions of religious agency in relation to the wider debate predominating in the field of Islamic feminism.
Chapter 2 engages with Aboulela’s writing of an alternative history in “Days Rotate” and The Kindness of Enemies. In these two works, Aboulela adopts the infinite mystical time to recapture the past and future of the spiritual individuals. The chapter investigates Aboulela’s deep alignment with the mystical historical perspective that she utilises in writing these two works, thereby articulating her refusal of secular history’s bias against the spiritual aspects of history. In “Days Rotate,” Aboulela illustrates a mystical utopia in which she depicts a universal harmony, reflecting a spiritual ecological perspective. Chapter 2 traces the relation of this mystical style to the violence in the Middle East. A more comprehensive examination of Aboulela’s historical writing is conducted in reading her novel The Kindness of Enemies. In this novel, her historical narrative paves the way for a reconsideration of the history of the anti-colonial Sufi struggle in order to contest secular history writing.

Aboulela’s perspective of Muslim women’s religious agency is examined in chapter 3, which addresses Minaret, besides the two aforementioned works of fiction. It explores Aboulela’s views on the contemporary agentic resources available for Muslim women. The examination shows the complexity of the interaction of Aboulela’s feminist discourse and the tension between the secular and the religious. Writing about the religious agency of diasporic women, Aboulela in her narrative depicts the complications of achieving agency whilst living in a predominantly secular host culture. This chapter highlights her attempt to achieve an objective representation of women’s situations in the past, an objectivity that underlies an ideological position related to the historical one. In addition, this chapter embarks upon a reading of Leo Tolstoy’s Hadji Murat in order to provide context for Aboulela’s reading of the same historical moment and to achieve a sound understanding of Aboulela’s reaction to the Orientalist historical writings of the Caucasian anti-colonial struggle, situating her feminist critique within a postcolonial anti-secular one. Her depiction of religious agency is an interrogation of the limits imposed on the religious by secular modernity. Such an interrogation does not hesitate to ask questions regarding contemporary terrorism and what she perceives as its colonial-associated roots.

Chapter 4 examines the film Bab’Aziz and studies Khemir’s utilisation of the notion of intuitional knowledge to emphasise the individualistic nature of religion and, therefore, to criticise the terrorist actions of 9/11 undertaken in the name of religion. This is complemented by representing this knowledge as akin to firasa, literally “spiritual insight,” in terms of its essential role in the survival of the desert journeypersons. The chapter clarifies how, by exemplifying this knowledge, the director attempts to refute the way Western Orientalists and Islamic fundamentalists alike abhor Sufism as endorsing superstition. The chapter also addresses some aspects captured in the film as reflections of
postcolonial reality, including national borders. It tackles Khemir’s view of the problematic identity imposed on postcolonial individuals by these borders. The chapter revisits spiritual ecology in its investigation of the contribution of the desert and its animals to the spiritual experience of the travellers. In this section, the discussion prompts a recollection of Al-Koni’s depiction of the spiritual animal, which is compared to Khemir’s representation of the animal. Finally, the analysis highlights how Khemir derives the perspective of women from Ibn ‘Arabi’s description of the theophany in his representation of women’s agency, rendering it part and parcel of intuitional knowledge.

Building on the intuitional knowledge introduced in chapter 4, chapter 5 examines Alem’s endorsement of the same perspective to contest the social and ideological hierarchy imposed on Sufi women. Before embarking on a critical analysis, the chapter investigates the problematic translation process of Alem’s novels. The reading of Alem’s My Thousand and One Nights shows the extent to which women’s religious agency is affected by a gendered duality, characterised by associating women with the body and men with the spirit, thereby restricting women’s spirituality to the erotic experience. Alem’s perspective on women’s agency as correlating to a transcendental spiritual experience is explicated in relation to her novel Fatma. The discussion of this novel shows Alem’s rejection of the ideological authority of Wahhabi ‘ulama. This authority, as the novel makes explicit, comprises a social and ideological bias against Sufi women.

Having laid out the structure of this thesis, it is necessary to indicate that the study of the political and historical factors throughout the chapters may seem, at times, to overpower the feminist ones. However, these factors are crucial to the discussion because they are integral to essential components of agency, such as power, autonomy and resistance, and because they shape the agentic resources available to Muslim women. The discussion in the following chapter attempts to facilitate a perception of the impact of these factors on Islamic feminism and the conceptualisation of religious agency.
Chapter 1: Muslim Women’s Agency and Modernity

1. Introduction:

Islamic feminism’s conceptualisation of religious agency is affected by the Eurocentric nature of modern human sciences. Idealising modernity as integral to progress and advancement makes the religious agency of Muslim women in postcolonial nation-states vulnerable to the ideological struggle between the secular and the religious. Secular modernity influences Islamic feminists’ engagement with Islamic textual traditions by provoking variable historical approaches stimulated by the relation to the secular. These variable approaches show the extent to which Islamic feminism is complicated by the ideological and political issues of the postcolonial world.

Some scholars propose anti-secular approaches to textual traditions marked by strict adherence to the text and its classical interpretation. Other scholars’ utilisation of secular approaches is justified by the need to produce modern agentic models. For the latter group, engagement with textual traditions must be reshaped within secular views of history. To provide a comprehensive examination of religious agency in the literary and cinematic works under scrutiny, this chapter examines the writings of prominent scholars who engage with the debate. A discussion of these scholars’ contributions can reveal current views of textual traditions as well as the extent to which the central position of the secular within the debate has affected the conceptualisation of religious agency.

Asad’s discussion of agency in Genealogies of Religion (1993) is important to this examination. Although it is centred on the medieval monastery, THIS work can be read beside Asad’s Formations of the Secular (2003), in which he discusses the issue of agency in relation to contemporary Muslim subjects’ experience. The investigation in both of these texts pays abundant attention to the necessity of understanding the relation of the secular to the religious as a starting point to understanding religious agency. The hierarchical relation between the two that situates the religious in the margins of modernity is central to Asad’s scholarship. In addition to Asad, this chapter cites Dipesh Chakrabarty’s argument in Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference (2000), as well as Amy Hollywood’s “Gender, Agency and the Divine in Religious Historiography” (2004). Chakrabarty’s text concerns the dysfunction of modern history in writing the religious agency of the Santal tribes and the need to theorise for the “subaltern past” (100), whereas Hollywood discusses the problems of applying modern sociological aspects of human
This chapter refers are Khalid Abou El Fadl, Raja Rhouni, Ziba Mir-Husseini and Saba Mahmood in order to explicate the debate around the role of textual traditions in the formations of religious agency. Although a long list of feminists have engaged with the debate, confining the discussion to the selected names is important to retain the specific scope of the argument and its development.

This chapter introduces the positions of Aboulela, Alem and Khemir in this debate without attempting to provide a complete resolution of where the authors stand. This immense matter is left to the following chapters to investigate in depth. This chapter, however, clarifies that there seem to be two major tendencies regarding the manner in which the textual tradition is handled, creating scriptural and non-scriptural paradigms of religious agency. The influence of secular historiography on the Sufi ideologies with which the authors and artists under scrutiny are affiliated is relevant to their approaches to textual traditions. As the analytical chapters will make clear, these approaches, like Islamic feminism itself, are shaped by the postcolonial ideological crisis.

2. Religious Agency and Secular Historiography:

The hegemony of modernity over history has inscribed its influence upon the conceptualisation of agency. Religious agency is problematised by the domination of secular historiography in three ways. First, the modern conceptualisation of agency makes it synonymous with “resistance;” and “freedom”, concepts that prove subversive to religious discourse. Second, in light of such conceptualisations and in line with Marxist notions of “false consciousness,” agentic action is mainly classified as such because it is viewed as rational. This may result in excluding religious practice from agentic action because it is perceived as irrational. Third, because secular historiography accounts only for events and experiences that can be proved with material evidence, how can mystical power such as Divine Providence or mystical transcendental experience, around which religious agency is centred, be articulated? These issues have attracted the attention of scholars who engage with religious agency in varying ways.

Asad argues that modern historical writing was formed after the advent of the Enlightenment by associating the secular and Christian tendencies towards history. In his view, “to make history, the agent must create the future, remake herself, and help others to do so, where the criteria of successful remaking are seen to be universal” (Genealogy 19). This understanding, for Asad, does not acknowledge actions within “local” paradigms as history making (19). This constructs a hegemonic concept of agency. Thus, agency, for Asad, is informed by history—as is his anthropology of religion. Secular history, Asad argues, permits human beings to envision a specific model of agency. That is, this history
provides human beings with a life designed by the capacity to make free choices: “a history in which everything can be made, and pleasure always innocently enjoyed—a framework that allegedly enables us to see ordinary life as distorted or incomplete” (Formations 73). Asad is critical of the way this secular perspective of history produces a universal view of agency that implies a certain anticipation of the lifestyle of the agent. This monolithic concept of agency reduces its applicability to secular individuals. It creates a basic definition of the agentive individual as “a conscious agent-subject having both the capacity and the desire to move in a singular historical direction: that of increasing self-empowerment and decreasing pain” (79). For Asad, this perspective of agency leaves no space for the religious agency that he perceives to take a completely opposite position.

Secular agency is conceptualised in relation to the body, which, according to Asad, connotes “the individual whose desire and ability to act are taken as unproblematic” (Formations 68). For Asad, associating agency with the body in such a way emphasises desire as the driving power for undertaking actions (68). This analysis of agency shows the essential difference between secular and religious agency. In Asad’s consideration, the modern binary of the spiritual and the corporeal, or the sacred and the profane, and the detachment between the two paves the way for the marginalisation of the religious and the spiritual. Such a binary renders religious agency hard to recognise because it does not function in compliance with the same forms of empowering action as secular agency.

This leads to a second issue: Religious experience is not recognised in secular scholarship as a valid epistemological arena, but merely as a subjective one. This is influenced by the secularisation of public space and the use of reasoning as the primary source of knowledge. In Genealogies of Religion, Asad discusses the way in which religion becomes more or less an “individual belief,” a “perspective” or an “attitude,” whereas science is regarded as the facts upon which society is established (45-9). The distinction between religion and science renders religious knowledge peripheral to scientific objective discourse; it is regarded as “more primitive, a less adult mode of coming to terms with the human condition” (46). The modern perspective on religious experience is, Asad asserts, influenced by Marx’s idea of “false consciousness,” which sees religion as “a mode of consciousness which is other than consciousness of reality, external to the relations of production, producing no knowledge, but expressing at once the anguish of the oppressed and a spurious consolation” (46). This Marxist concept represents a profoundly influential form of secular thought that participates in marginalising the sacred and underestimates religious experience, whether it takes the form of a source of epistemology or merely an embodied individual practice.
In Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference (2000), Dipesh Chakrabarty investigates the problematic situation of historicising the religious experience of the Bengali tribes of the Santal. The Santal tribes rebelled against British colonisation in 1855 (102). The resistance was promoted by the Santal leaders as reflecting a mystical quest: The Santal fought on behalf of their god Thakur who, in turn, protected them from the “British bullets” (103). Chakrabarty critically engages with the way the mystical motivation and articulations have been tackled by historians who utilise modern democratic historiographical tools. He argues that historicising a mystical-based agency in a colonised society is complicated by the paradoxical application of Western concepts of historicising “from below” and by what modern historicity requires in terms of rationality and evidence as essential factors for determining what has to be inscribed in history (102). This form of historiography produces what Chakrabarty names the “subaltern past,” connoting a past that does not conform to the rules of modern historiography (101). The “subaltern past,” Chakrabarty explains, is a minority history in terms of being a representation of “lesser importance” or of “marginal” pasts that do not require the attention of historians due to these discourses’ lack of reason and their inability to function within the modern codes of democracy (100-1). Historians may submit such narratives to the common rules of anthropology:

A narrative strategy that is rationally defensible in the modern understanding of what constitutes public life—and the historians speak in the public sphere—cannot be based on a relationship that allows the divine or the supernatural a direct hand in the affairs of the world. The Santal leaders' own understanding of the rebellion does not directly serve the historical cause of democracy or citizenship or socialism. It needs to be reinterpreted. Historians will grant the supernatural a place in somebody's belief system or ritual practices, but to ascribe to it any real agency in historical events will be go [sic] against the rules of evidence that gives historical discourse procedures for settling disputes about the past. (104)

The religious history of the colonised is neglected as illegible for historical writing. Within modern historiography, religious agency is viewed as paradoxical because it does not represent an active personal will to enact social justice. Religious postcolonial subjects’ reliance on their interaction with the mystical as a source of achieving agentic action resists modern aspects of historiography both for its religiosity and its lack of tangible evidence.

Aboulela’s historical narratives in “Days Rotate” and The Kindness of Enemies represent a reaction to the hegemony of secular historiography. By embarking on such narratives, she strives to reclaim a religious viewpoint of the history of Sufism and
recapture a future that is not dominated by secular modernity. As the following chapter will clarify, Aboulela’s engagement with a Sufi paradigm compels her to resist the effect of colonisation and neo-colonisation on the religious experience of spiritual Muslim women. For Aboulela, models of religious agency available for Muslim women are restricted due to the colonial impact on gender relations. As the discussion of chapter 3 will reveal, Aboulela’s view of supportive patriarchy situates women’s agency within spiritually informed gender relations. The ideological problems caused by colonisation led to the deficiency of such relations, thus affecting religious agency. Furthermore, Aboulela’s depiction of past and future models of religious agency shows her avoidance of subjecting past gender relations to modern day feminist perspectives, which represents a perspective similar to Amy Hollywood’s on the resistance of modern humanism’s impact on past perspectives of religious agency.

In her article, “Gender, Agency and the Divine in Religious Historiography” (2004), Amy Hollywood argues that applying modern ideological concepts to notions of religious experience and agency in the medieval period is problematic because temporal and ideological boundaries can affect how mystical experience is examined (519). She observes that subjects who seek religious-based agency attribute power to the Divine and perceive their religious endeavours as a form of power or “religious authorisation” (514). This problematises the notion of religious agency because modern history does not account for the influence of mystical elements in an undertaken action. Like Chakrabarty, Hollywood considers the impact of the secularity of modern historiography on the examination of religious agency and concludes that it may produce a normative description—that is, contemporary scholars tend to “engage in a description of that experience shaped by modern naturalistic categories of thought” (518). Religious experience, whether it is historical or contemporary, is likely to be reproduced by modern ideological patterns (519). Hollywood compares the problematic relationship of this ideological issue concerning religious historiography to that faced by postcolonial analysis (520). Both histories, the religious and the postcolonial, are at risk of being misinterpreted through the lens of modern normativity (520). With regard to agency, postcolonial and religious experience may, thus, not find their way into modern narratives of history. This argument raises an important issue: The manner in which history has to be articulated within the framework of present secular ideologies makes past gender relations an object of subversion.

In the feminists’ case, these questions led to a process of mining the religious past for answers related to modern concepts of gender equality and relations. Hollywood’s
concerns about the dangers of projecting gender questions—including those involving the patriarchy of monasteries—and how this exerts a crucial influence upon Christian women’s religious agency seem justified. Similar questions apply to explorations of the gender hierarchy in the early generations of Islam. Modern debates concerning the Prophet Muhammad’s polygamous marriages are a prominent example. Such debates are often nourished by the potential claim that textual traditions and their patriarchal interpretations of gender relations leave hardly any real space for women’s agency. As will be discussed shortly, contemporary Islamic feminists engage with these debates both approvingly and disapprovingly.

Chakrabarty and Hollywood emphasise that the Eurocentric nature of the social sciences has complicated religious agency both in the past and in the present. However, other scholars blame the religious discourse itself for its failure to engage with modern human sciences. Sadiq Jalal Al-Azm, in his Critique of Religious Thought (published in Arabic in 1970 and translated into English in 2014), argues that the gap between postcolonial subjects in the Middle East and Western humanism is a result of the Middle Eastern ideological structure, which is shaped by its political and religious power relations. He explains that religion directed the interest of human sciences to the past, prompting a scholastic movement towards analysing sacred texts as the sole source of knowledge (23). He states that since these texts are made immune from critique by contemporary Islamic parties, human sciences are locked fruitlessly in a process of interpretation and reinterpretation of these texts (23). The religious interest in the past, Al-Azm continues, makes it static in nature and permits it to encourage passivity against political and ideological change (23). Al-Azm, however, does not specify whether the lack of religious humanism is a result of a contemporary ideological deficiency or is an essential feature integral to Islam.

In a more specific manner, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd argues in his Circles of Fear: Reading the Discourse about Women (2000) that there are two interdependent discourses which have determined Muslim women’s situation throughout Islamic history: a Quranic progressive discourse and a sociolinguistic traditional discourse. For him, the contemporary religious discourse stems from the latter, which, he explains, tends to surface in times of the decadence of Islamic ideologies. This discourse, as he clarifies in Critique of Religious Discourse (first published in Arabic in 1994 and translated into English in January 2018), is absolutist in its claim of one truth. Unlike the Quranic discourse, which did not claim authority over all aspects of life at the time of the Prophet, the contemporary discourse is expansive, as it permeates all aspects of life and claims a complete knowledge...
of the divine will (50). The absoluteness of the contemporary religious discourse is caused by the intended confusion between the contemporary reception or “understanding” of the text and the text itself (51). For Abu Zayd, this absoluteness complicates religious agency. He explains that this discourse locks the human-divine relationship into “servitude” and promotes it as an antithesis to reason (56, 104). This discourse’s refusal of reasoning both within and outside the religious field is attributed by Abu Zayd to the contemporary discourse’s enmity to secularism (56). For him, the “reliance on the tradition” cannot offer a religious source for agency because of the determinism of the discourse. For Abu Zayd, historicising the texts can amend this absoluteness by revealing tolerant and plural intentions of these texts (51). By the historical study of the texts, Abu Zayd aims to reclaim the Quranic discourse once more, a discourse which, he says, has addressed women directly without the mediation of the man and which has improved women’s position in a society which used to see in women’s mere existence a shame which could only be abolished by infanticide (31).

Whereas Al-Azm does not see any potential for religious texts in modern humanism, Abu Zayd asserts the need for a comprehensive engagement with the history of the texts. It is worth noting that the scholarship of Asad, Al-Azm and Abu Zayd has influenced Islamic feminism and facilitated the emergence of feminist readings of the texts. The investigation in the following section will reveal the feminist debates on the ability of the sacred texts to offer agentic resources for Muslim women.

3. Religious Agency and Different Approaches to Textual Traditions:

It is clear now how secular historiography affects the conception of religious agency. Whereas some Islamic feminists attempt to historicise textual traditions, thus locating Shari’a laws within their historical, social and political context, and articulate their anticipation of the linear development of these laws, others perceive this approach as a desacralisation of this tradition. These approaches tend to produce continually conflicting interpretations of textual traditions. The former approach seems to facilitate an individualistic form of religious agency, whereas the latter asserts a hierarchical and collective one. The tension in the conception of religious agency cannot be isolated from approaches to textual traditions. Elements commonly seen as essential to modern agency, such as “resistance” and “power” tend to stimulate feminists’ reactions to certain Shari’a concepts regarding gender relations. This debate reveals different views of the textual authority.

Loyalty to authority is perceived by Asad as intrinsic to accepting submission. Asad translates iman, faith, as “the virtue of the faithfulness to God” (Formations 90). He
sees simply translating iman as “faith” to be lacking because iman does not represent “a singular epistemological means that guarantees God’s existence for the believer,” but rather “an unquestioning habit of obedience that God requires of those faithful to him (mu’minīn), a disposition that has to be cultivated like any other, and that links one to others who are faithful, through mutual trust and responsibility” (90). Asad’s proposed interpretation of iman, which informs his idea of agency, shows the power relationship as being not between the Divine and the individual, but between the Divine, society and the individual. The fact that iman does not represent a source of belief, but rather a form of belief, is a crucial expression of the required internal devotion. That is, faith has to be sought through the fulfilment of this triangular relationship; it is gained from the exterior and the collective and through the embodiment of the required acts.

In this way, moral responsibility falls equally on the community and the individual (Asad 91). The idea of responsibility implied by this definition is integral to the “openness to pain.” Both can be contained, as Asad indicates, in the process of cultivating virtues, as well as tolerating penalties (91). In the Islamic doctrine, Asad argues, this takes the form of the al-amr bil-ma’rūf wan-nahy ’an al-munkar or “the requiring of what is good and the rejection of what is reprehensible” (91). For Asad, this entails a struggle within the subject’s spiritual devotion. That is, “the body-and-its-capacities is not owned solely by the individual but is subject to a variety of obligations held by others as fellow Muslims,” and this creates “a continuous, unresolved tension between responsibility as individual and metaphysical on the one hand, and as collective and quotidian on the other—that is, between eschatology and sociology” (91). This reciprocal interaction in issues of both eschatological and worldly interest implies a struggle, undertaken by the individual and society, to enact and enable the predominance of moral acts as perceived through engagement with textual traditions. Islamic feminists’ debate over religious agency seems to dwell on this struggle. Because of this struggle, feminists mostly depart from a literal reading of textual traditions and move towards an interrogation of the texts, seeking an individualistic and a pro-women’s conception of agency.

The way power is seen and responded to is central to Asad’s anthropological discussion of religious agency. For him, the “utopian” secular history that provides human beings with free will and the power to create their own history is false (Formations 73). He stresses the importance of studying the manner in which subjects and their desires are created so that the anthropologist can understand the agentic patterns available to them (Genealogies 13). He emphasises the importance of studying the heterogeneity of meanings that can be attributed to agentic action, whether cultural or ideological. For him,
these are “predefined social relations and language forms, as well as the body’s materiality” (13). Asad’s conceptualisation of agency is based on submission to textual traditions and is informed by his perspective on textual traditions as both discursive and embodied. For him, such elements are essential to agentic action because they influence models of agency. In Genealogies, Asad explains that the way medieval monks perceived power and discipline made them learn to “will obedience” (125). Asad clarifies that the obedience of these monks did not mean that any of them “lost his own will,” nor was this an automatic and submissive response to power (125). Rather, obedience was, for the monk, “his virtue—in the sense of being his ability, potentiality, power—a Christian virtue developed through discipline” (125). The basic principle of monastic obedience, Asad argues, was that “virtuous desire had first to be created before a virtuous choice could be made” (126). This obedience requires surrendering one’s own desires and will to the conduct of textual traditions (“Thinking about Tradition” 174). This agency is, for Asad, not formulated by struggling against the authority of these traditions, but by associating oneself with them (174). Asad argues that this submission represents an agentic action because it implies a potential refusal of other sources of authority, such as that of the bodily desires that could be in conflict with this religious and ethical code (174-5).

To give an example of agentic submission, Asad examines how an actress may learn to undermine her real self, although temporarily, to realise the embodied character she is playing in a role (Formations 75-6). The performed action is not completely the actress’s because it belongs to the author, the dramatist, the director and her school of acting, yet this action does not render her a “passive object” (76). In a religious context, Asad also finds the way in which some religious subjects, such as the Shi’a Muslims and some Christians, may perform painful acts, through the Passion of Christ and the Martyrdom of Hussein, to embrace the pain undertaken by Christ and Hussein, thereby permitting themselves to be an extension of that sacred self (78). This, for Asad, is meaningful in terms of the way human will can be undermined intentionally as part of involvement in a certain context of specific power relations. The intentional embodiment of pain is another form of connecting oneself to the source of authority. For Asad, the “openness to pain” that characterises the relationship of Christians to Christ and Shi’a Muslims to Hussein marks their attempt to live in relationship with their deities or saints and to establish their agency as Christians or Shi’a Muslims by experiencing the same suffering (Formations 85). For Asad, the fact that pain is actively chosen is a substantial factor in shaping agentic action. Pain is necessary for religious agency because, as Asad explains, it is central to the religious understanding of “obligation” and the responsibility generated from it (99).
Asad’s attempt to deconstruct secularism dominates his definition of faith. He rejects the notion of reducing faith to an epistemological source of belief in order to undermine the secular perspective of the individual as self-constituted. Placing faith in the collective and public spheres, as requiring a perpetual struggle on the part of the individual, can also work to resist the secular privatisation of religion. Perceiving faith as stemming from the external paves the way for a hierarchical model of responsibility in textual traditions. The influence of such an interpretation of faith concerning the idea of moral agency has gained abundant attention from Islamic scholars.

Abou El Fadl, for example, does not resist the notion of collective authority. However, he introduces conditions for its practise to avoid transforming it into “authoritarianism” (266). In his widely acclaimed book, Speaking in God’s Name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women (2001), he discusses an egalitarian engagement with this authority, thus providing a balance between the collective and the individual. Ironically, Abou El Fadl’s egalitarian approach seems to rely heavily on a hierarchical view of religious knowledge. According to this view, there are two types of agents, the first being “special agents,” or jurists, who are required to approach textual traditions with a certain authority to evaluate their contribution to the targeted moral value through an examination of its authenticity and social implications. Common agents, on the other hand, are “the believing, pious Muslims” who willingly submit their religious opinion to that of the “special agents” (53). The hierarchy of the two agents is justified by certain “contingencies” that properly qualify the “special agents” to approach textual traditions. These are “honesty, diligence, self-restraint, comprehensiveness, and reasonableness” (54-6). Such features shape the relationship between the two agents and, therefore, the relationship between the collective and the individual. The undercurrent of Abou El Fadl’s argument is that a resolution between the two agents can be accomplished by avoiding a monolithic and compulsory consideration of textual traditions. The special agents have to practice “self-restraint” to ensure that they do not attempt to assume the “role of the Principal” (56). In so doing, they can avoid the practice of “[l]ocking or captivating the Will of the Divine, or the Will of the text, into a specific determination, and then presenting this determination as inevitable, final, and conclusive” (93). The “common agents” have the right to know that the juristic interpretation of textual traditions is one truth indicated by the jurists and not the ultimate truth, and that it is not necessarily in profound and complete compliance with these traditions (93, 265-6). They, therefore, hold full responsibility for their reception of the interpretation (265-6). For Abou El Fadl, this system of hierarchy can provide a space for the articulation of individual convictions. Therefore, the plurality of textual traditions will not supress the individual’s questioning
conscience. As a believer who began his books by drawing attention to the fact that he writes as “a Muslim who is also an academic scholar and not as an academic scholar who happens to be Muslim” (Reasoning xiii), Abou El Fadl’s approach to textual traditions is, in fact, based on his conviction of the ultimate justice of these traditions. Reconsidering the difficulty of the theoretical conception of this balance, let alone its practical application, Abou El Fadl embarks upon a process of modification.

He proposes that if such a clash exists—a clash of textual traditions with the individual sense of morality—then the Islamic juristic system should be able to tackle it. He proposes what he calls the “conscientious-pause” to consider a “faith-based objection to the textual evidence” (93). According to this “conscientious-pause,” the “special agent” is to embark on an investigation based on an evaluative consideration of both the authenticity of these traditions and their “theological, legal, and social impact” (268). Whenever the tension remains unresolved—for example, because the traditions that caused a moral dilemma appear to be authentic—Abou El Fadl concludes that the “special agent” has to act within the moral view indicated by his or her conscience (94, 218). For him, this means searching for the justice intrinsic to the message of religion, even if this makes justice more important than adhering to historicity or the analysis of the text (270-1). His argument connotes that the original interpretation can be dismissed whenever it cannot be accommodated within modern views of agency, indicating a readiness to submit textual traditions to secular humanism because they dominate the way agency is conceptualised in the modern day. “Special Agents” who find the laws of textual traditions to hinder women’s agency, in the modern sense of the word, can use their authority to reframe such laws. It is important to note that justice is utilised by Abou El Fadl as universal and self-evident and left without identification, despite the crucial influence conflicting views of justice have over the debate. What makes a certain interpretation just for women due to its suitability for their social and ideological position is susceptible to dispute from others who take different positions. To identify a particular meaning of justice is to introduce a specific context for Abou El Fadl’s scheme. Placing his argument within the postcolonial paradigm reveals more issues, as the interpretation itself will be subject to other factors intrinsic to the moral hierarchy, such as the political affiliation of the “special agents,” which may render an individual’s objection unrealistic. This makes this scheme an
idealisation of the individual’s relationship to textual traditions because the latter may not have the ideological and political freedom assigned to him or her by Abou El Fadl.\

In his more recent book, Reasoning with God (2014), Abou El Fadl reinvestigates the authority of textual traditions within the postcolonial paradigm. He explains that these traditions are used by puritan Islam in a way that is biased against women due to the interaction between this authority and the postcolonial sense of “political and social defeatism” caused by the loss of the past glories of Islam in Andalusia and later in Palestine (204). This “defeatism” leads to viewing women’s agency as conforming to and even being a part of a Western anti-Islam plan (204). By propagating notions that associate women with fitna, meaning a “source of enticement and social discord” (204), women are oppressed under the umbrella of social welfare. This results in a detrimental situation for women’s agency. To thwart Western plans and to protect men’s religiosity, women’s bodies and sexuality are magnified as a site of vulnerability that requires social concern and control (219-20). In this way, women’s intellectual and spiritual competence is completely marginalised (220). This shows how the socially and politically motivated approach to textual traditions made by “special agents” is anything but flexible or pro-women. The patriarchal enactment of the Shari’a is selective and neglects texts that assert women’s rights. Projecting patriarchal views onto Shari’a leads to legitimising women’s oppression. Furthermore, patriarchal power over the texts poses the danger of manipulating women’s access to these texts. Therefore, feminist interaction with such patriarchal manipulation centres the issue of women’s dire need to acquire religious knowledge. Women’s competence in Shari’a permits them to challenge the hierarchy over their religiosity.

It is no surprise, therefore, that Alem, who writes from such a context as a Sufi feminist in Saudi Arabia, rejects patriarchal authority over textual traditions wholesale. She sees the monolithic ideology produced by patriarchal Wahhabi ‘ulama’s engagement with these texts and their negligence of local spiritual and cultural orientations as resulting in a “patterning of thought,” or tanmeet (qtd. in Arebi 114). This “patterning of thought” is associated with a form of religiosity predominantly marked with misogyny on one hand and anti-Sufism on the other. As a Sufi woman writer, she asserts the difficulty of Sufi women’s situation as this misogyny is assimilated into Sufi society. As the examination of her texts will explicate, Alem’s depiction of Sufi women’s agency shows how this double

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5 In fact, it is due to his anticipation of such problematic issues that he initiated his study by declaring that this proposed approach is strictly confined to the contours of “the Islamic legal tradition,” forestalling criticism of idealism (Speaking x).
marginalisation has affected women’s perspective of the mystical and complicated the way they access it. The mystical is depicted by Alem as reflecting a social commodity subject to the manipulative accounts of patriarchs and matriarchs. The struggle between the individual and the collective regarding moral responsibility, referred to by Asad, seems manifest in Alem’s representation of Sufi-based women’s agency. Asad’s reference to the conflicting sides as “individual and metaphysical on the one hand, and as collective and quotidian on the other” (91) summarises key factors in Sufi women’s struggle. Within patriarchal society, women’s bodies are seen as collective property, which affects their individual relationship with the mystical. Alem’s feminist writing reflects this entanglement of the mystical with patriarchy in relation to women’s agency; her view of women’s spirituality as being integral to knowledge necessitates a challenge of the collective control over women. Alem’s discourse is complex due to both the Sufi orientation with which she engages and the feminist position from which she writes.

Sharing a similar position, Khemir rejects monolithic literal readings due to the way they restrict and limit spirituality. In Bab’Aziz, Khemir’s depiction of woman as theophany serves many political and ideological functions, via which he ascribes to God feminine and earthly features. Motivated by wahdat al-wujūd, Khemir uses this pagan methodology to contest violence committed in the name of Islam as well as antagonistic views of women. As chapter 4 will elucidate, locating God’s light and knowledge in women contests extremists’ violence and patriarchy. In his representation of spiritual women resides a visual embodiment of the mystical and an incarnation of the text. The representation of the Sufi understanding of certain Qur’anic verses gained through human artistic activities such as spiritual dances and poetic activities confirms Khemir’s perspective of the necessity of approaching the text within a Sufi framework. Both Khemir and Alem centralise intuitional knowledge as part of religious agency, elucidating how this knowledge is highly individualistic and essentially heterogeneous. Alem’s and Khemir’s positions are related to the notion of elitism of religious knowledge, connoting that a literal reading of the text is a basic and common practice and only highly spiritual individuals can uncover the “True Reality,” or haqīqa, of the text.6

As Ibn ‘Arabi states in the introduction to The Meccan Revelations, he intended to fragment the highly valued Sufi views so that they would be comprehended only by spiritual readers (Chodkiewicz 15–16). Ibn ‘Arabi aims particularly to exclude the

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6 In his Epistle on Sufism, Abu l’Qasim al-Qushayri explains the concept of haqīqa: “The Law is [God’s] command to always comply with [the requirements of] servitude. The True Reality is the contemplation of [divine] Lordship. . . . The Law exists so that you would worship Him, while the True Reality exists so that you would see Him” (105).
Due to his rejection of external learning as a substitute for the spiritual search for knowledge, Ibn ‘Arabi refuses to make his ideas accessible to people who follow such a method. For him, spiritual knowledge is rich and complex; attempting to subject it to such literal methods may reduce its value, according to such readers’ limited perception (15). Thus, Abou El Fadl’s “common agents” are not seen as agents at all by Alem or Khemir because of their elitist view of knowledge and their refusal of ideological hierarchy practiced by “special agents”.

The intended elitism of Sufi literary articulation is used for different purposes by Alem and Khemir. It enriches Alem’s writing with enigma, which she has needed to resist antagonistic patriarchal and scholarly responses to her works. Khemir pays attention to the postcolonial fragmentation of the Islamic nation caused by postcolonial states, and Alem contests both political and gender-based hierarchies placed over individuals’ spirituality. Their works show a struggle to draw attention to spiritual knowledge as intrinsic to religiosity. For these authors, this knowledge can help to internalise religiosity and prevent external and authoritarian judgements and classifications.

Furthermore, Alem’s and Khemir’s perspective of religious agency finds resonance in some Islamic feminists’ engagement. Many Islamic feminists propose alternative approaches to the literal readings informed by their feminist standpoints. Generally speaking, two major camps of feminists have emerged in relation to concepts of agency. First, there are feminists who prioritise women’s agency, which for them is based on gender equality, over the common good implied by public moral responsibility, which they resist as an enactment of patriarchal authority. Second, there are feminists who perceive agency to be attainable via spiritual empowerment and acceptance of public responsibility, regardless of its explicit patriarchy and subordination of women. The first type of feminists seems to follow in the footsteps of Abou El Fadl’s assertion of conscientious persuasion in order to seek an articulation of moral questions and, thus, keeping the tension of agency manifest and resistible, rather than permitting it to seep into women’s individual and mystical realms. The second group of feminists comprises figures like Saba Mahmood, who sees in this unresolved tension an invitation for women to endure the calamity of their situation, an ideological position similar to Asad’s perspective of “agentive pain.”

Mir-Hosseini and Rhouni both define themselves as believers and as writing within an affiliation to Islam and its sacred texts (632 and 13, respectively). Their affiliation with Islam is articulated through their search for the social justice they see as integral to religion (629 and 13, respectively). Their resistance to collective moral responsibility stems from
their rejection of the patriarchal interpretation of textual traditions. In her 2006 article, “Muslim Women’s Quest for Equality: Between Islamic Law and Feminism,” Mir-Hosseini calls for a distinction to be made between faith and “organized religion” (632). She argues that glossing the two under the name of Islam results in “the pervasive polemical and rhetorical tricks of either glorifying a faith without acknowledging the horrors and abuses that are committed in its name or condemning it by equating it with those abuses” (632). For Mir-Hosseini, faith should remain something of individual connotation for social justice to be maintained. She therefore applies this perspective to textual traditions, arguing that faith has to be detached from monolithic interpretations of Shari’a (632). For her, the Shari’a is “sacred, universal, and eternal,” but its interpretations, or fiqh, are not (632). She argues that Islamic modern nation-states claim authority over the two aspects of Islamic legislation to produce their versions of family law (632). This results in the prevalence of unjust laws against women in the name of religion. Mir-Hosseini attempts to contest patriarchy at the fiqh level, which is for her “nothing more than the human understanding of the Divine will” (633). She believes that the Shari’a itself represents a perfect model of justice, but dominant interpretations of the Shari’a, conducted by patriarchs, have resulted in gender inequality and the subordination of women. These interpretations can only be resisted via the deconstructing critique of Islamic feminism. She puts forth an understanding of women’s rights and gender relations that stems from a belief in a democratic perspective of social justice and equality. She affirms that Shari’a has to be interpreted within the world perspective of the believer, thus producing more contemporary legislation (637). Such an understanding seems promising due to its assertion of the receptor’s context, which differs from that of the seventh century when the Qur’an was revealed to the Prophet.

Rhouni, whose only book, Secular and Islamic feminist Critiques in the Work of Fatima Mernissi (2010), is seen by Margot Badran as the second-best book on Islamic feminism, presents an opinion concerning faith, textual traditions and Islamic feminism that is very different from that of many other feminists. Relying on a differentiation between Shari’a and fiqh similar to that of Mir-Hosseini, Rhouni problematises the concept of faith by arguing that because faith is defined as comprising aqida and Shari’a (34), the former is defined as “the belief in the unity of God, the angels, God’s scriptures [kutubihi], his prophets, and the day of judgement” (34). By problematising the view of textual traditions in the same way as Mir-Hosseini did, she concludes that faith is often mistakenly

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measured in terms of one’s adherence to fiqh (34). An understanding of Shari’a as a complex and accumulative dogma, guided by but not concluded in the Qur’an, shapes Rhouni’s interpretation of gender discourse in the Qur’an. She makes a powerful argument that she bases on her awareness of the influence of history upon textual traditions. She states that

Even when I objectively recognised that gender equality is not a norm established by Qur’anic discourse, I see it as a horizon or trajectory pointed at by the Qur’an. As a believing woman, I see Islam as an unfinished project of social justice and gender equality. Consequently, I consider Islamic feminism an important project in diffusing this awareness through the production of knowledge, which struggles against mystifying discourses and restores to Islam its historicity and dynamism.

Rhouni’s rejection of the notion of sacrificing gender equality is coupled with an emphasis on the need to address the patriarchal aspects of the Qur’an “without apologies” (14). This daring call transcends typical methodological critiques of hermeneutical mistakes in considering a redefinition of Islam itself. Inspired by Mohammed Arkoun’s scholarship, she explains that Islam is not a single ideology, but “an immense era in which abound the most diverse and the most irreducible ethnic and cultural groups, languages, systems of belief, sociological and anthropological structures of imaginaries, and collective memories” (Rhouni 36). She resists the normativity and passivity that has encompassed Islam in the modern age. This normativity permits what Rhouni calls “foundationalism” or “essentialism,” which she identifies as a false feminist endeavour to prove that gender equality is fully maintained in the Qur’an (17). For her, this claim is made by feminists who selectively mine gender-related Qur’anic verses for modern aspects of equality and emancipation, whilst neglecting many patriarchal aspects of the Qur’an (14).

Both Mir-Hosseini and Rhouni refuse to compromise gender equality, but they employ different approaches to rationalise their contestation of patriarchal interpretation. Mir-Hosseini precedes Rhouni in questioning Qur’anic authority over the idea of justice, finding refuge in an ancient debate over this issue. Rehearsing the historically controversial debate between the Ash’ariyyah school and the Mu’tazilah school, in which the former argued for an abidance by the text to establish the source of justice and the latter undertook a rationalist approach and claimed that the idea of justice was not confined to the texts and

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their classical interpretations (633), Mir-Hosseini affiliates herself with the Mu’tazilah school to seek a more contemporary perspective of justice (633). Such affiliation can enhance the debate if equipped with adequate historical engagement, but unfortunately Mir-Husseini did not explicate how the ideology of Mu’tazilah can support women’s engagement with textual traditions and their quest for religious agency.

Rhouni introduces a “postfoundationalist” view of Qur’anic gender traditions that stems from her historical approach, which sees the Qur’an as “a discourse, situated in a particular historical, geographical, linguistic, and cultural context” (269). Therefore, this discourse has a specificity that can be transcended. Within this approach, Rhouni follows “descriptive and dialogical” aspects to address the patriarchal content of the Qur’an (269). According to this approach, patriarchal aspects of Qur’anic tradition can easily be regarded as implementations of social interactions with the Qur’an, rather than as intended orders made by God through His revelation. For example, Rhouni considers qiwamah as “a description of the state of things that necessitates reform” (259). Therefore, gender hierarchy is mentioned in the Qur’an but is not addressed, and thus Muslim society is left to tackle it through a process of evolution. Rhouni here emphasises the subordination of the text to social order.

This sounds an echo of a well-known argument that associates Islam’s way of addressing slavery with polygamy or patriarchy in general. The argument goes as follows: Islam arose in a society that considered slavery as normative. It encouraged Muslims to fight against slavery, but it did not attempt to accomplish a complete abolition of slavery in the life of the Prophet due to the foreseen predicaments that can be induced by such a radical social change. Therefore, although it was not a just practice, its eradication was a lengthy and gradual process that was not controlled literally by the Qur’an. This is a powerful contention initiated by Fazlur Rahman in his *Major Themes of the Qur’an* (48) and was approached favourably by Abou El Fadl (269), both scholars agreeing that gender hierarchy is an unjust practice that the Qur’an aimed to abolish. Indeed, Rhouni found this reasoning to support her perspective on the Qur’an.

However, in *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur’an, Hadith and Jurisprudence* (2006), Kecia Ali problematises this approach by arguing that the abolition of slavery was not solely the product of a religious enhancement of the social and intellectual search for justice, but rather came from a combination of “non-religious

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9 The degree assigned to men over women by the Shari’a. This degree is defined in variable ways by Islamic scholars and became a site for feminists’ contestation of gender hierarchy.
historical processes and interpretive choices by individuals” (53). By this, she is referring to the international treaties of engaged Muslim nation-states. On the contrary, some Muslim scholars, Ali explains, theorise that the prohibition of slavery was conditioned by the absence of a “legitimate caliph” who could authorise a jihad and distribute “the spoils of wars” (53): They see slavery as suspended, not abolished. Ali does not attempt to discourage feminist endeavours, but, instead, illustrates the manner in which this approach views slavery as a completely terminated practice, although it is, in her opinion, still not fully addressed (52-4). Ali is concerned that feminists and other Muslim intellectuals take the abolition of slavery as sound evidence of Qur’anic social justice, without investigating the manner in which slavery has come to reflect that justice.

Rhouni’s views utilise the notion of the temporal universality of textual traditions to encourage a dynamic approach to these traditions. Her “postfoundationalist” approach aims at facilitating a defeat of the antithetical debate over agency. However, Rhouni’s proposed historicity reduces the impact of the Qur’an’s moral discourse by making it address the generation who lived through it, thus producing a secular approach to sacred texts that limits them to historical chronicles.10

The aforementioned debate seems to be centred around one potential argument that involves modern standards of women’s agency as being based on emancipation and resistance and how these concepts can fit with Islamic doctrine. Women’s agency, here, requires resistance against collective moral responsibility because this responsibility is likely to be of a patriarchal nature. Therefore, the tension between modern views of agency and textual traditions remains an insurmountable hardship within the debate over Muslim women’s religious agency. Khemir’s and Alem’s perspectives on intuitional knowledge can be perceived as related to this feminist viewpoint in that it provides an individualistic reading of the texts. A major point that distinguishes Khemir and Alem from the two aforementioned feminists is that they do not seek historical detachment from the text. In fact, Khemir shows a profound interest in the intellectual and political history of Islamic civilisation. Furthermore, due to the individualistic nature of Alem’s and Khemir’s Sufism, they struggle not against the secular, like Aboulela, but against the scriptural Islam that they perceive as alienating Sufism.

Amidst those who adhere to a different constitution of agency is Saba Mahmood, who holds a stricter position with regard to textual traditions. For Mahmood, the conflict between eschatological and social responsibilities is caused by the domination of

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10 This issue concerning the secular historicity of the sacred is discussed extensively by Talal Asad in Genealogies.
secularism, which alters public attitudes towards religion. Muslim women’s rights, for her, are based on one fundamental quest: spiritual freedom and freedom of practice. This quest is challenged by secular modernity, postcolonial national ideologies and a spiritually disorienting patriarchy. However, Mahmood supports the notion of collective moral responsibility, which she sees as implied by textual traditions. For her, religious agency is established via the notion that women have to agree to be subordinate to patriarchs, whilst simultaneously ensuring that this subordination is controlled by male submission to these traditions (170). This submission requires maintaining resistance to other forms of authority that could undermine spirituality. Mahmood does not consider gender hierarchy to reflect injustice in so far as it does not involve an impediment to spirituality.

Like Mahmood, Aboulela’s view of patriarchy as being spiritually supportive is intrinsic to her agreement with collective moral responsibility. As the discussion in chapter 3 will make clear, supportive patriarchy is positively depicted by Aboulela as essential to women’s agency. Motivated by a profound respect for the religious past and textual traditions that she believes exhibit a positive attitude towards women’s agency, Aboulela associates women’s agency with adherence to the texts. She does not oppose Shari’a law even if it comprises strict measures against women’s agency. She agrees with Asad and Mahmood that such measures produce “agentive pain.” Her fiction does not represent a mission of negotiating the texts; on the contrary, it depicts the spiritual women’s endeavour to achieve obedience. This perspective of religious agency indicates how Aboulela’s approach to textual traditions is inclined towards acquiring a scholastic and spiritual competence.

In her acclaimed study of the female participants of the Islamic movement in Egypt, Mahmood presents an interesting view of religious agency based on endurance, or ḥabr, and adaptation to patriarchal society as an alternative to the secular feminist conception of resistance. Mahmood adopts Foucault’s perspective of power,\(^\text{11}\) that is, first, power should not be reduced to “domination,” to being owned and directed by an authority, but should be seen as “a strategic relation of force that permeates life and is productive of new forms of desires, objects, relations, and discourses” (17). Second, the subject is created by these power relations (17). Therefore, Mahmood’s argument is presented in this way: “the set of capacities inhering in a subject—that is, the abilities that define her modes of agency—are not the residue of an undominated self that existed prior to the operations of power but are themselves the products of those operations” (17). She

\(^{11}\) Mahmood’s discussion of Foucault’s view of power is based on his books, Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth (1997) and The History of Sexuality (1990).
therefore establishes her concept of agency as equivalent to “subordination” (18). This conception is clearly a unique one in its detachment from the notion of resistance as key to agency.\textsuperscript{12}

To validate this theoretical basis, Mahmood scrutinised the daily lives of a group of religious women who belonged to different social and economic groups in Cairo. This permitted her to ground her study of religious agency upon the interaction between religious and social boundaries and the way in which such boundaries defined the lives of these women, as well as the forms of agency available to them. The study reveals the extent to which the patriarchal society to which these women belonged burdened them by narrowing the space available for spirituality (156). For some of Mahmood’s participants, secularised views of progress and civilisation have rendered some religious practices, such as wearing the veil, backward, and this represented an almost insurmountable challenge for religious women (176). Furthermore, the pressures of marriage and the ensuing problems of having to handle an immoral or religiously lax husband represented another ongoing predicament (170). Although most women’s options were limited in such a society, Mahmood made clear that utter emancipation and gender equality were unattainable (174). These women could only survive their situations morally, Mahmood explained, by resisting the influence of the situation on their spirituality. They articulated some of their survival strategies, including crying in their husbands’ presence, avoiding eating with them and seizing control of sexual relations (185-6). If such methods did not work, women could seek a divorce, sacrificing their personal and social interests for the sake of their spirituality (186). For Mahmood, the efforts made by these women to endure such circumstances in favour of their spirituality were intrinsic to their agency.

Mahmood’s perspective of agency is based upon the responsibility of the subjects to maintain their spirituality by resisting the negative impact of the social order. She explains that the female participants found endurance, or ṣabr, a possible way to “infuse” their painful experiences with meaning (173). The practice of endurance involves juxtaposing the admission of a human’s limited influence over his or her circumstances and the endeavour to improve them (173). For Mahmood, religious knowledge assists women’s endeavour to endure (168). She sees in endurance an agentic model that originates from the means and resources available to these women (187). However, this

\textsuperscript{12} Mahmood refers to Judith Butler’s complex examination of subjectivity in Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (1999) and other works in order to assert that subjects see their agencies within the society and power relations that create their perspectives of themselves and the world (Mahmood 19). However, Mahmood uses the theory for a different end: Whereas Butler rejects fixed gender identities, or what she calls “[t]he compulsory order of sex/gender/desire” (45), Mahmood magnifies the gendered rules of Shari’a.
model returns the struggle to the individual domain, because social reform is impossible and women are required to tackle inevitable social injustice individually as an alleged part of Islamic traditions. This may cause spiritual women to feel subjugated by these traditions, a feeling that may not be articulated for fear of apostasy. Mahmood’s perspective reduces agency to the spiritual resistance of the victimisation that befalls women at the hands of less spiritual men. It relies heavily on the notion of endurance, to the extent that agency becomes no more than an act of reformulating an inevitable misfortune into a virtue. Mahmood’s argument neglects the possibility of the pro-faith articulation of an individual’s objections to collective moral hierarchy.

Mahmood’s account shows the way that practicing religious agency has been directed to the resistance of unjust patriarchy rather than patriarchy as a whole. Therefore, the situation guaranteed to women under qiwamah, moral and financial support, is not fully available due to these circumstances. Mahmood’s argument implies that secular feminists’ conceptualisations of emancipation is irrelevant to the actual lives of Muslim women, and the religious agency offered to them has to be shaped by the immediate circumstances of their lives. This form of religious agency is of little relevance to the concepts of women’s agency assigned to them by textual traditions. Mahmood attributes this departure from the standards of traditions to the lack of spirituality in modern Muslim societies, which increases women’s suffering. That is, it causes a defect in the supportive patriarchy that is seen by Mahmood, as by Aboulela, as being interconnected with spirituality.

The insistence on strict adherence to the scriptural formulation of religious agency under the dominance of secular humanism encourages Mahmood and Aboulela to call for a specificity of religious agentic models. The consideration of Muslim women’s political, social and ideological contexts is a way of avoiding Western modernity’s impact on the identification of agency. The secular is represented in Aboulela’s fiction as complicating women’s agency due to its complex and perpetual tension with the religious. This is particularly true of Aboulela’s migrant protagonists.

Mahmood’s view of agency is influenced by Asad’s in two ways: first, in terms of its conceptualisation, because religious agency as related to embodiment involves obedience and pain, rather than resistance and pleasure; second, in the analytical way that it regards religious agency as a site to resist the secular. Both reasons for enduring “agentive pain,” as mentioned in Asad’s scholarship—that is, the acquisition of virtues and the practice of law (Formations 90-1 Genealogies 165)—are forms of surrendering the individual will to that of textual traditions to fulfil collective moral responsibility. That is, the struggle to cultivate moral virtues takes much of its meaning from the awaited mystical
reward. Similarly, the pain resulting from penalties would not be accepted without belief in its eschatological benefit for the subject because the pain is perceived as purification from a committed sin. The religious agency represented by Mahmood can only gain value within this understanding. Women’s endurance is the virtue that they strive to enact in order to maintain their eschatological reward and the wellbeing of the society. Aboulela’s feminist discourse does not comply completely with this perspective because her depiction of agency is not always neatly detached from the profane and the secular.

For Mahmood, rights assigned to women in the Shari’a have been confiscated by the modern nation-state, which wrote modern family law by exploiting religious traditions (Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report 149). As a result, essential marital aspects, such as the concept of marriage as a contract that provides women with authority to negotiate or terminate marriage, are now missing (149). Furthermore, the concept of nushuz, disobedience, which is, according to Mahmood, applicable to both genders, is stressed by modern family law as a form of male authority over rebellious women (149). For her, the secular politics of modern nation-states offer as much ground for patriarchy to flourish as that offered by Islamic textual traditions (153). She sees patriarchy legislated by these traditions as distorted by the modern family law. Mahmood risks essentialising her argument by not engaging critically with the juristic scholarship on gender hierarchy, even though she confirms the necessity of studying textual traditions side by side with secular politics (149-53). Mahmood’s call for the examination of both secular and religious aspects within Islamic feminism is overwhelmed by her attempt to hold the secular fully accountable for the unjust gender relations common to the modern Islamic world.

Such a position has led to criticism from Sadia Abbas in her chapter “The Echo Chamber of Freedom: The Muslim Woman and the Pretex of Agency” (2014). Abbas sees Mahmood’s non-objective examination of religious and secular views of gender relations—an aspect central to much of Mahmood’s scholarship—as involving a “larger project” that was embarked upon by Mahmood “to discredit secular and reformist Muslims altogether” by connecting their ideology to Western political and imperial projects (66). Abbas’ critique is based on Mahmood’s depiction of secular feminists as participants in an imperialist project conducted by the United States. In fact, a reading of Mahmood’s article that includes this argument, “Secular, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation” (2006), may support Abbas’ accusations. Mahmood argues in this piece that Islamist reformers might not approve of the United States’ political strategies, yet their allegiance, from the American perspective, is visible due to their “shared approach to
scriptural hermeneutics” (329). In particular, scholars who attempt to “historicize the Qur’an” ([emphasis in original] 335) are participants in what she refers to as the imperial project of the Rand Corporation. Historicising the Qur’an forces the sacred book to be “appreciated for its cultural significance, as an object of aesthetic, poetic, and spiritual appreciation, rather than treated as a source that can guide one through the problems of contemporary existence” (336). This perspective is not only reductive of Muslim feminists’ attempts, like the ones mentioned above, in terms of revising textual traditions within their own life contexts, it is also troubling in terms of its absolutism. It does not permit a critical engagement with textual traditions.

4. Conclusion:

The contrasting perspectives of religious agency reveal contrasting views concerning Islamic textual traditions and their sanctity, as well as their history. Textual traditions that are seen by one faction as anti-feminist and patriarchal are idealised by the other as providing a model for social justice. Similarly, the past that is interrogated and deconstructed by the former group for the sake of perceiving the relevance of textual traditions to modern times is, for the latter scholars, both sacred and utopian. Kecia Ali writes rather interestingly on this issue, criticising the polarity of this debate. She urges scholars who engage with this issue to produce a “collective enterprise of scholars thinking, talking, and writing jointly and in counter-point” (153). The possibility of such debate is not only bound to the intellectual production of the aforementioned feminists, novelists and cinematic director, but to the political, historical and social factors that nourish such polarity within Islamic feminism.

Exhibiting a dismissive attitude towards the opposite viewpoint is problematic, particularly when scholarship is initiated with a presumption of tolerance of the traditions. Mahmood’s description of feminists’ attempts to “[h]istoricize the Qur’an” as a form of conspiracy (335) is only one example. On the other side stands Rhouni’s argument against Islamic feminists’ project of “retrieval,” (34) which she sees as an attempt to recover the lost model of Islamic gender equality and as leading to fundamentalism in the sense of a “search for a truth” (16, 25). Overall, both parties engage with textual traditions within a framework shaped by their perspective of what forms faith and its consequences.

Without open-minded reciprocity, this disparity will remain prominent in any intellectual debate on Muslim women’s agency. The fact that those who seek to

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13 Mahmood refers specifically to a report titled Civil Democratic Islam: Partners, Resources, and Strategies that sees “traditionalist Islam,” or literal Islam, as a threat to the United States and its democracy (332).
revolutionise juristic interpretations have to initiate their arguments by confirming their positions as Muslims, including Abou El Fadl, Rhouni and Mir-Hosseini, only proves the existence of such a divide. They felt compelled to affirm their belonging in order not to be dismissed as outsiders. Islamic scholars and feminists may need to identify and reclaim religious narratives in order to be capable of producing a rich and contemporary contribution that pertains to their convictions in the universalism of the message of Islam. Without doing so, attempting to conceptualise religious agency may result in a failure similar to that of the scholars who attempted to historicise the Santal tribe’s agency. As Chakrabarty’s account made manifest, separating the spiritual from the material dimensions of religious agency and attempting to assimilate religious agency to secular history only results in an inauthentic model of agency.

Aboulela, Khemir and Alem approach textual traditions in variable ways. Tied strongly to their Sufi orientations, these approaches affect their views of religious agency. Religious agency for Aboulela requires the existence of a moral hierarchy leading to the approval of a Shari’a-informed patriarchy. This patriarchy is contested by Alem as restricting women’s mystical experiences. Khemir and Alem place women at the top of this hierarchy as reflections of God’s wisdom. Aboulela perceives knowledge as intrinsic to the text, whereas Khemir and Alem perceive it as residing in the human. Within the scriptural framework of Sufism, philosophical understanding of intuitional knowledge is no more than a manifestation of ignorance and conceit. The following discussion of the two views on textual traditions and agency will situate them within the ideological and political factors that stimulated their emergence in the selected literary and cinematic works under scrutiny.
Chapter 2: Historical Otherness and Spiritual Utopia: The Alternative History in Aboulela’s Novels

1. Introduction

Aboulela’s fiction offers a historical rewriting of certain spiritual struggles. This rewriting is provoked by what Aboulela perceives as an alienation of spiritual schools. The present chapter discusses Aboulela’s utilisation of the spiritual view of time as a mystical factor that resists human conceptualisation and elucidates how she adopts this perspective in order to capture an alternative past and future for Sufi subjects. The mystical time permits the past and future to co-exist in the present. This view of time, as Aboulela’s “Days Rotate” makes clear, provides an opportunity to write a futuristic form of spiritual civilisation based on Sufism in order to resist claims that secular modernity is the sole form of civilisation. For postcolonial subjects, a mystical understanding of time provides a suitable framework for the reinvestigation of the past because it resists temporal and contextual boundaries. Aboulela’s writing of Imam Shamil’s anti-colonial struggle in The Kindness of Enemies proposes a religious writing of history. Her fiction resists the neo-colonial influence on the perception of the colonial past.

Aboulela’s writings assert that postcolonial non-secular subjects need to dismantle the power that secular history holds over their own history in order to be capable of taking an active role in their present. In fact, as the discussion of Aboulela’s literary works will reveal, the religious notion of history promotes a counter-understanding of history based on spirituality as an important strategy for survival. The spiritual protagonists of Aboulela’s fiction recognise the absolute time of the mystical as capable of liberating the reality of the colonised because this time cannot be perceived or designed by the modern mind. Therefore, in Aboulela’s literature, both the return to the past and the approach to the future illustrate the overthrow of modernity’s domination over the present.

This chapter examines Aboulela’s literary expression of the estrangement of spiritual subjects caused by the predominance of secular modernity. This investigation aims to establish Aboulela’s affiliation with a conservative Sufi ideology as well as her position on secular modernity in order to pave the way for a sound perception of her views on women’s agency within this ideology.
Aboulela’s short story, “Days Rotate” (2001), and her latest novel, The Kindness of Enemies (2015), (henceforth, The Kindness) are approached within this framework. In addition to these key texts, the chapter refers occasionally to her other texts, The Translator (1999), Lyrics Alley (2010) and “The Houriyah” (1999), in order to clarify how Sufism operates in Aboulela’s postcolonial writing. In particular, “Days Rotate” and The Kindness represent Aboulela’s perspective on the efficiency of the spiritual approach to history. The study of these texts shows that Sufism offers a counterview of secular history that emerges from the religious conviction in the alternation of spiritual and civilisational states; a powerful civilisation today is not necessarily one tomorrow. This notion seems to be intrinsic to Aboulela’s literary representation of the past and future spiritual struggles that appear in her short story and novel. As the forthcoming discussion reveals, this notion functions, in Aboulela’s writings, as a tool of resistance to both secular imperialism and violent Islamic extremism.

For Aboulela, the domination of secular history permits an effective role for modernity in the evolution of religious practice. Subjecting religious ideologies to modern secular history results in a lack of religious genealogy of contemporary religious concepts; the modern conceptualisation of jihad is represented by Aboulela as an example of this rupture of religious history. The scrutiny of the way secularism has affected the practice of jihad will be examined in relation to Aboulela’s depiction of the political dimensions of her Sufi discourse.

2. Sufism in Aboulela’s Fiction:

Aboulela’s writing takes a Sufi form, comprising a profound attachment to and discipline by religious textual tradition. The spirituality of this Sufism is strictly shaped by religious knowledge as one way to avoid the delusion of the ego. This Sufism is emphasised as politically active, playing a key role in confronting colonisation and neo-colonisation. Aboulela’s relation to Sufism, which is influenced by the popular Sufi traditions of Sudan, involves accepting Sufism as a spiritual practice with a special influence on humans’ capacity to transcend time and place. However, this acceptance is restricted by her perspective that following Sufi traditions with no awareness can cause believers to deviate from the guidance of the Shari’a. In an interview with C.E. Rashid, “Islamic Individualism and the Logic of the Narrative” (2012), Aboulela was asked about her view of the relation of Sufism to the textual traditions. She asserted that she saw “them both together as being one” (620). To clarify her point, Aboulela narrated a symbolic story in which a perfect-looking woman’s corpse and an alive but ugly woman are gifted to a king as concubines.
and are rejected (620). Aboulela confirms that although the anecdote is “probably in a poor taste,” it delivers the message well. She explains:

The symbolism of the story is that the dead, beautiful woman represents the laws of the shariah, without the Sufism. Her perfection represents the form of the law but she is without life . . . And the other gift, of the woman who’s alive but ugly, represents the people who do everything out of love for God, yet who have rejected the shariah. In that case, the heart is alive with love and goodness but the body is hideous because the outside form of the shariah has been rejected. So if Sufism is aligned with the inside, and the shariah with the outside, then as Muslims we have to put the two sides together. (620)

Aboulela’s conviction about the necessity of combining the “two sides” of religion manifests throughout her fiction. In Lyrics Alley, Aboulela describes the Sufi milieu of Sudan as having a particular impact on Badr, an Egyptian teacher who finds the spirituality of prayer to be capable of soothing his pain when he is distressed and humiliated by his meeting with the socially and financially influential Mahmood (60). Badr reflects on how such a mystical experience may mislead less knowledgeable people, as well as on the emergence of Muhammad Ahmad Mahdi (1843-1885) and his followers, as follows:

The Sudanese needed rescuing from superstition and deviation . . . The Sudanese were good people, they loved the prophet Muhammed, peace be upon him, but they needed to learn more about his sunna so that they would stay strong and not follow individuals who would lead them astray like the Mahdi had done. (60)

In Aboulela’s terms, Sufism is empowering, but it needs to be accompanied by knowledge to be authentic and free from delusional practices. It should follow the textual traditions to sustain the Sufi’s endeavour to approach the Divine. Complete abidance by the texts is essential for spirituality. Spirituality is not necessarily attainable via human efforts but is granted as a result of this attachment. In The Translator, she writes, “Knowledge is necessary, that’s true. But faith, it comes directly from Allah” (191). For Aboulela, theatrical attempts to invoke a spiritual experience are misleading. In the aforementioned depiction of Badr’s experience, Badr reflects that only by following the prophet can the Sufi cultivate the fruits of his mystical experience (60). This confirms Aboulela’s Sufi perspective that spirituality is guided by the textual tradition. In this incident, the impact of Badr’s spiritual experience mimics that of the zar dance mentioned by Fanon in that it permits direct access to the mystical. This access comforts Badr because it limits the pain of the moment by elevating his awareness towards the immediacy and vastness of the mystical (60). Aboulela’s representation of spiritual empowerment is
profoundly interconnected with access to mystical time. This interconnection facilitates both the rewriting of the spiritual history and the approach of the materialistic present.

3. **Mystical Time in Leila Aboulela’s Postcolonial Discourse:**

To arrive at a profound perception of mystical time and the way it functions to decolonise the spiritual subjects’ history, it is necessary to revisit the argument about Fanon’s depiction of the mystical dance, conducted in relative depth in the introduction. In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961, 1990), Fanon criticised the indigenous African ritualistic dance, the zar, because he sees it as an opiate that hinders decolonisation (44). It pacifies the colonised mystics’ anger, taming them and enabling the colonisation to persist: “The native’s relaxation takes precisely the form of a muscular orgy in which the most acute aggressivity and the most impelling violence are canalized, transformed and conjured away” (44). Understanding their suffering, Fanon sympathises with the colonised and, as his book makes clear, engages with their cause to fight and defy the colonisers. However, his study of the mystical side of the colonised shows some distance:

At certain times on certain days, men and women come together at a given place, and there, under the solemn eye of the tribe, fling themselves into a seemingly unorganized pantomime, which is in reality extremely systematic, in which by various means – shakes of the head, bending of the spinal column, throwing the whole body backwards – may be deciphered as in an open book the huge effort of a community to exorcise itself, to liberate itself, to explain itself. (44)

The distance represented in Fanon’s account is due to his depiction of mystical experience as merely symbolising a form of communication. This marginalises the religious conviction of the dancers. This depiction of the dance realises the physical dimension of the mystical experience as it relates to the secular calculation of reality. It implies, despite its secular nature, another form of reality in which the “seemingly unorganized” dance turns out to be “extremely systematic.” Therefore, in Fanon’s depiction of the dance, there are two timescales: first, the time of the colonised body, measured through contemporary time machinery and determined through its specialised scale, and second, the absolute time of the mystical. The tension between the two is profound; however, this tension can liberate the spiritual subjects when the mystical transgresses the present. The indigenous implore the mystical through the zar in an attempt to retrieve it in the present. This mystical dance allows the colonised to locate the present as finite and limited in relation to the eternal absolute. This makes transcending the present possible. The zar dance does not seem a reflection of passivity. In fact, the colonised resist the bitter fruits of colonisation through the power of spirituality. As the investigation of spiritual ecology will demonstrate
later in this chapter, for postcolonial subjects, inner spirituality connected to the power of nature is capable of altering material reality.

The Sufi orientation affects the sense of time throughout Aboulela’s work. Spirituality here involves an experience of the mystical infinite time. On the other hand, religious practices regulated by textual laws require the subject’s return to physical time. The duality of the two realms in Sufism explains the sense of immediacy in Aboulela’s futuristic writings. In The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam (2013) Muhammad Iqbal explains:

The mystic state, in respect of its uniqueness, remains in some way related to common experience. This is clear from the fact that the mystic state soon fades away, though it leaves a deep sense of authority after it has passed away. Both the mystic and the prophet return to the normal levels of experience, but with this difference that the return of the prophet . . . may be fraught with infinite meaning for mankind. (18)

After the mystical experience, the Sufi attempts to imitate the Prophet in the earthly life, focusing particularly on religious practice. His experience of mystical time alters the Sufi’s perception of time. On one occasion, Badr overhears Sudanese Sufis reciting Umr Ibn al-Farid’s verses:

Compared to my Dawn,

*the long day’s light is like a flash;*

next to my drinking place,

the wide ocean is a drop. [Italics in original] (133)

Ibn al-Farid’s poetry indicates that, after contemplation of the power and persistence of mystical time, earthly life seems short and insignificant. Badr reflects on how “in a day of suffering in the world, an hour was nothing in the long run” (134). According to this view, earthly life means very little on the timescale of the mystical life. The spiritual subject’s belief in a permanent eschatological life renders the grief of earthly life insignificant. In Aboulela’s fiction, the mystical experience permits a comparison of the two worlds and asserts what the characters perceive as the immediacy of God’s Providence. As an examination of Aboulela’s fiction reveals, many of Aboulela’s protagonists find in this immediacy a sense of ease.

The rewriting of the past in The Kindness stems from the same sense of immediacy that renders past spiritual struggle perpetually present. This assists Aboulela’s quest to
contest the colonial and neo-colonial secular dominance over the past and the future. By utilising the mystical view of time, Aboulela attempts to rewrite the history of the spiritual individuals whose past and future remain colonised by secular modernity.

Spiritual subjects believe in the capacity of the Divine to end the linearity of modern time as manufactured by Western projects through a process of rebirth, thereby ending secular centrality and spiritual otherness. This belief is supported by the religious understanding of profane history as finite. Textual traditions see history as a flow of continuous, interrelated events that occur in the earthly and mystical worlds alike. These traditions emphasise the temporality of worldly civilisations and all earthly life on the one hand, in comparison with that of the mystical on the other. Both aspects are well constructed in the Islamic view of history. First, the Islamic perspective of history is centred, according to Iqbal, on considering history as a mining site for lessons from precedent nations, illustrating pitfalls that believers should learn to avoid (110). Murata and Chittick, in The Vision of Islam (1994), explain how the historical “signs” of these nations remind believers that the “ultimate end” or, ‘aqiba, lies in seeking God (325). However, as Iqbal clarifies, the contemplation of these historical “signs”, together with the consideration of natural and spiritual signs, is systematised for the fundamental purpose of acquiring spiritual knowledge (101). Second, according to the religious perspective, life on earth is temporal. The day of judgement is to be preceded by a complete destruction of the structures of civilization—which will be, in a way, the complete termination of the material aspects of life. This marks an apocalyptic event similar to that described in the Christian traditions of the Revelation. Two interconnected aspects derived from this religious viewpoint of history seem to influence Aboulela’s writings: First, spirituality is a power that assists in history making, and second, because human beings are unable to achieve a perpetual spiritual perfection because of their material desires, the history of civilisations is of limited duration.

Iqbal explains that the contemplation of historical and natural “signs” confirms that time cannot be considered “a series of mutually exclusive moments” because the limits imposed by this definition prevent the contemplation of the universe (105). Iqbal elucidates that the “organic” movement of the universe operates in relation to mystical time, rather than physical time (40). The mystical time, or what he calls “Divine Time”

is not a string of separate, reversible instants; it is an organic whole in which the past is not left behind, but is moving along with, and operating in, the present. And the future is given to it not as lying before, yet to be traversed; it is given only in the sense that it is present in its nature as an open possibility . . . It is time freed
from the net of casual sequence- the diagrammatic character which the logical understanding imposes on it. In one word, it is time as felt and not as thought and calculated. (40)

Thus, as Iqbal explains, through the contemplation of signs, which is both a spiritual and intellectual action, the Sufi is able to feel a “possession and enjoyment of the infinite” (105). The mystical time, Iqbal continues, cannot be perceived by the human consciousness in that it does not pass into the familiar divisions of past, present and future; rather, it is “gathered up in a single super-eternal ‘now’” (60-1). Iqbal concludes that time, whether physical or mystical, can only be truly experienced and understood through the experience of the consciousness (61).

This understanding of time assists postcolonial subjects in re-establishing their relationship with history. The rupture in the history of the colonised caused by colonisation can be treated, as Aboulela’s narrative seems to suggest, by the spiritual perception of time. For Sufi subjects, history is not controlled by human power. Despite humans’ attempts to divide time and grasp it, it is beyond human ability to perceive the continuity and immediacy of its absoluteness. In this respect, the past, present and future are equally shaped by the will of the Divine.

For Aboulela, the secular modernity promoted by neo-colonialism has greatly affected the postcolonial Middle East, both as an emblem for politics and as a cultural model. The tension with secularism takes many forms of violence, which are amplified by the political and religious polarities of modern nation-states. Sceptical of secular modernity, Aboulela’s mystical writing expresses this attitude by questioning the past and the future of human civilization. Aboulela’s “Days Rotate” shows a sense of anxiety regarding violence in the Middle East. It expresses a Sufi view of the mystical as a supernatural link to the past and the future and as a symbol of grief over the distant, irreversible modern day lost under the wheels of secularism and violence. Aboulela may have opted to use mystical aspects to overcome the pessimistic anticipation of future travails in the Middle East in the postcolonial era and to extend to the current time. Predicting a prosperous future for humanity shaped by the power of spirituality works to deconstruct the secular mind’s domination over history. For Aboulela, the return of mystical approaches to history is necessary because it allows a view of both the past and the future as fixed, determined by the Divine, thus barring the secular mind from its assumed dominance.
In “Future Shock: Rewriting the Apocalypse in Contemporary Women’s Fiction” (2012), Susan Watkins explains that writing about the future in Sufi terms seems to liberate it from modern hegemony (121). That is, as Watkins clarifies, the connection between humans and metaphysical elements creates an alternative context in which “potent ethical and political possibilities emerge” (125). Sufism can assist the decolonisation of history and the spiritual subject by problematising the rationality of the secular narrative. The metaphysical dimensions of Sufism highlight the limits of modern reason as well as its failure to look beyond material existence. In Sufi literature, as Henry Corbin notes in his book Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi (2013), history takes on a transcendental dimension according to which time does not belong to the physical realm (35). Sufis’ time is “discontinuous, qualitative, pure, psychic time, whose moments can be evaluated only according to their own measure” (35). Because this notion of time exists beyond materialistic measures, it resists all forms of hierarchy, anticipation and forgetfulness. Corbin explains that for Sufis who hold this view of time, the past, present and future exist at once, “just as the notes of a musical phrase, though played successively, nevertheless persist all together in the present and thus form a phrase” (35-6). This perception of the past as accompanying and inhabiting the future is particularly important to postcolonial subjects. The liberation of the past can liberate the present and the future from the influence of colonisation. In short, the transcendental nature of time makes it un–colonisable.

Aboulela’s representation of the past and future from a religious perspective transcends the literary depiction of these times, changing it from an object of longing and fantasy to a belief in potential spiritual resistance. Aboulela’s The Kindness (2015) represents her Sufi perspective of the Islamic past, including its cultural, political and ideological dimensions. It takes her depiction of this Sufi orientation to a new level as a context for rewriting the past from a religious perspective. This novel is significant in understanding Aboulela’s Sufi discourse. The novel follows the character Imam Shamil (1797-1871) and his battles against Russian colonisers. The rewriting of his story is necessary for Aboulela due to the need for a spiritual perspective of history. The resurrection of the imam seeks to balance the spiritual approach of Sufism to what they perceive as a sublime history by concurrently de-idealising it and providing it with temporal and contextual proximity. Such an approach makes this history realistic and capable of inscribing its implications into the present.

For spiritual individuals, approaching the past through the power of spirituality permits its existence in the here and now. This perspective can contribute to the fulfilment
of a nostalgic sense of the past, and it may justify the robust belief in the impact of Sufism in literary postcolonial narratives from the Middle East. Aboulela has indicated that she finds in Tayeb Salih’s novels, particularly The Wedding of Zein (1962, translated to English in 1968), a traditional Sudanese aura, a feature highly shaped by the novel’s Sufi air. However, Aboulela’s Sufism is not only a literary aspect but a system of belief.

**Spiritual Power in Aboulela’s “Days Rotate”:**

Aboulela’s fiction carries a sense of deferred pleasure as well as an anticipation of final eternal fulfilment and a spiritual peace. Her characters spend their entire lives attempting to reach this final destination. Life and death are no more than stages of this journey towards the eternal unity with the Divine. Her novels end as they start, with a renewed spiritual cause waiting to be fulfilled.

Aboulela’s Sufi ideology is revived as a postcolonial paradigm. Her affiliation with Sufism can assist in addressing the problematic situation of postcolonial identity, which is severely affected by the modern polarity between the mystical and the profane. The futuristic elements of her writing, as in “Days Rotate” and “The Houriyah,” reflect a conviction that the Islamic early age of the Salaf, literally “predecessors,” is the ideal spiritual age, as well as a belief in the possibility of its future existence. This belief in the limited history of civilisation enables spiritual subjects to believe in future alterations that they can anticipate because of their mystical experiences.

Aboulela’s “Days Rotate” is formulated through what seems to be a return to the Sufi ideology, stimulated by the dire need to gain an Islamic spiritual perspective of the contemporary world. Its anti-modern tendency is a means to decolonise the present from the materialistic powers that dominate life. As the title shows, the work follows a mystical view of history, as inscribed in Islamic traditions in which the continuous struggle between materialistic and spiritual powers results in alternating victories for each. Civilisations rise and decline in correspondence with the collective people’s deeds, in particular their abidance by textual traditions; thus, venturing to violate religious orders may lead to the decline of nations.

“Days Rotate” is an allegory that follows the story of a young, unnamed female narrator and her husband, who fought in the fictional Great War against the material powers, as they travel in an ascending journey towards a skyward destination (implying the

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14 From a speech in PEN American: www.worldvoices.pen.org/event/2011/04/29/great-global-book%C2%A0swap
15 Salaf refers to the Prophet’s generation and the two generations that follow him.
16 The Qur’an states, “These vicissitudes We alternate among people” (3:140 [translated by N. J. Dawood]).
mystic’s spiritual journey towards heaven). The short story tells the reader that the spiritual power won the Great War in 2114 (132), and the victory terminated all aspects of modern life, including media, technology and dominant modern ideologies, such as feminism (132, 137). This victory led to a rebirth of Earth and humanity into a utopia. People’s powers became solely spiritual, such that individuals possess different miracles depending on the strength of their spirituality. For example, the male protagonist can fly by “pressing his will against gravity” and can change his eye colour depending on his state of mind (136, 133). People are able to see angels and communicate with animals, stones and plants (134). To achieve such an existence, people must reduce their material needs to extreme limits; therefore, they eat and sleep less (137). Women marry at a young age, and polygamy becomes the norm (133-4). Justice in this world takes a different dimension than it does in the modern day: It is accomplished by completely diminishing the nation-state so that people can travel and migrate with no limits (137). Moreover, as people detach themselves from material pleasures, resources are distributed equally so that humanity does not experience famines (137). This mystical utopia is disturbed by the looming return of materialism threatened by the “Freedom Lovers,” who call for a different estimation of human rights, including women’s rights (137).

Throughout the story, the two protagonists ascend a mountain towards heaven, struggling against gravity. This struggle resembles the spiritual struggle against material desires. The exhaustion that befalls the narrator is interpreted by her husband as being caused by her attachment to her material life. He tells her that she must “empty” herself of her material bonds in order to keep ascending (131). During their upward journey, the couple engage in a conversation in which the male protagonist recalls moments of his past life as a “modern-day man” whose ultimate aims were purely materialistic (132). Now, having experienced the vastness and beauty of the sacred life, he is determined to fight against the return of modernity and “machines” (138). The story ends with the couple succeeding in their journey to heaven and flying into the sky (139).

Aboulela considers civilisations to be the physical constructions of spirituality. This notion represents the cornerstone of Aboulela’s views on collective religious agency. Individuals’ commitments to religiously stated moral values contribute to the welfare or failure of the society. Therefore, society dominates and overpowers the individual. The “Freedom Lovers” prioritising individual liberty is depicted in “Days Rotate” as a potential cause for the failure of the spiritual utopia. Women’s agency, as the following chapter will discuss, is approached by Aboulela within the same framework.
In this work, Aboulela’s adoption of an apocalyptic style serves both the writing of an alternative history as well as a contestation of the Western modern standards of agency. Apocalyptic writing is associated mostly with science fiction and magical realism, both of which may utilise it to express increasing dissatisfaction with the domination of materialistic measures of civilisation, the physical and cultural domination of colonisers and the yearning for a “historical turn.” History, in this sense, is seen as a powerful agent for putting an end to the unjustness of humanity. Watkins explains that postcolonial female novelists’ utilisation of the apocalypse is based on the anxious anticipation of a future seemingly caused by the same powers and visions that created the turmoil of the present (119). The writers’ sceptical views of technological advancement, for Watkins, are based mainly on its relationship to colonisation, which motivates them to defy science and logic to propose an alternative interpretation of humankind (119). In this context, apocalyptic writing aspires to terminate colonial authority by proposing an anti-humanist perspective similar to that of leading anti-colonial scholars such as Fanon. The rejection of modern Western humanism by Aboulela is accompanied by an identification of an alternative spiritual framework.

Moreover, an apocalypse can take on religious and spiritual dimensions. The spiritual message of religion does not support the materialistic lifestyle introduced by modernity. Thus, “Days Rotate” suggests a mystical perspective of civilisation as an alternative to the materialistic one, due to the failure of the latter to fulfil the spiritual requirements of human existence:

Cars once drove up this steep mountain path . . . Before the Great War there were lights at night . . . There were escalators in shopping malls. Astronauts were sent to space. The earth was a tight, frustrated place. Some died of hunger, some paid money to lose weight. People locked up . . . he remembered the old days, passport and insurance companies. (131)

The story represents the sorrow and anxiety this materialism causes. When materialism inches back into the mystical world in the form of greed and ideological demands made by “Freedom Lovers”, the protagonists foresee another apocalypse in the form of a new war (137). This rotation of history is attributed to human beings’ weakness in the face of desire leading to individuals failing to comply with the requirements of mystical civilisation. The duration of the mystical world is particularly short: “We were warned from the beginning. We were warned that this mystical life, this contact with Heaven won’t last long” (138). For Aboulela, the apocalypse is related to the overwhelming desires promoted by modern materialism.
The mystical world changes the male protagonist from a materialistic man with a never-satisfied desire for materialistic gains into a saint. As a materialistic man, he “was covered in a thick rubbery skin, like an elephant’s skin” (132). This “skin” alienated him from spiritual life (132). In fact, the “rubbery…elephant’s skin” represents a caricature of the modern man’s amplified interest in the body. It shows how the materialist man is depicted as unusually awkward by the mystical man, similar to the way in which the modern man views his pre-historical “other.” However, the destruction of civilisation erases its image of the perfect human being. The apocalypse brings historical alienation to materialistic individuals. The accentuated disinterest in the body paves the way for a spiritual gender discourse, in which feminist issues are subjected completely to religious opinion, with no consideration of feminisms.

For Aboulela, spirituality may influence the flow of history and the predominant perspectives of women’s agency. In “Days Rotate,” Aboulela inscribes into the future the attributes of the current life of Muslim women. Her spiritual protagonists, such as Najwa in Minaret, for whom agency is particularly hard to achieve due to the domination of Western aspects of modernity in the present time, may participate in an active, mystical way in shaping the future evolution of human civilisation into a mystical world. “Days Rotate” functions as a precursor to the present-day story of Minaret. In this short story, Aboulela anticipates that despite the exhaustion that spiritual women in particular may experience under the reign of secularism, time will actualise their ideal lives, mainly because the earthly life is temporal and short in comparison to the mystical one. The spiritual perception of the immediacy of the mystical future appears best in “The Houriyah,” a prose poem by Aboulela:

The houriyah of Paradise lives in a council flat, carries the buggy, the baby twins, up the two flights of stairs. She and the four-year old step on cigarette ends, European dust, junk mail. They avoid the crushed beer can. Why the council don’t move us... only two bedroom here?

The houriyah of Paradise wears a long coat, dark, no prints, covers her hair, even her forehead is under that hood. Foreign, fanatic, oppressed by Horrible Arab Man... that is in the mind of the child's nursery teacher, vaguely. . .

The houriyah of Paradise dreams of a beautiful house on earth, with a garden. (33) [emphasis in original]
The houriyah is, in Aboulela’s words, “a beautiful alluring maiden of Paradise” (33). She is, for Aboulela, the future image of the faithful woman. Because the spiritual woman suffers the attributes of the here and now related to the troubles of materialistic life, and due to her spiritual attachments, the transcendence of this moment becomes necessary. Thus, whereas “Days Rotate” recalls the present day from a certain point in the future, “The Houriyah” brings the future to the present, re-evaluating the latter in relation to the future. Aboulela’s depiction permits the mystical to become manifest in the character of the spiritual woman, or “The Houriyah.” Because her faith is polished by the suffering she experiences and by her spiritual determination, she becomes an embodiment of the mystical future. In this sense, Aboulela represents pain and suffering as a way of approaching the desired future.

Moreover, “Days Rotate” articulates some radically negative viewpoints on science and technology, so whilst some spiritual human beings become capable of uncovering the living souls of the earth, animals, stones and plants, the return of technology may harm the earth and violate the sacredness of its creatures. Although Aboulela’s writing does not align itself fully with the spiritual ecology derived from Ibn ‘Arabi’s ideology of waḥdat al-wujūd (due to its paganism), she may have utilised its method of animating every being in the universe. The Sufi ideology of waḥdat al-wujūd allows the articulation of an anti-modern ideology through the setting of a universal scene, in which every animate and inanimate being is an active agent of the articulation. This notion renders spiritual identity as extending to involve all creatures, permitting the deploration of materialism in a universal context.

According to Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee, a pioneer in spiritual ecology, spiritual people live a life of unity with the universe; they believe in the spirit of the world, perceiving that the world lives in spiritual harmony and that the earth and all its creations are animate (246). However, Vaughan-Lee argues, Western Enlightenment caused human beings’ separation from nature and provided them with a sense of superiority over it (246). For him, life is based on strong interactions between the sacred or “inner reality” in the human and that in the non-human, which can alter both personal lives as well as that of the universe (248). Spiritual ecology highlights how the lack of spirituality has caused many physical disasters, beginning with the exceedingly materialistic consumption of natural resources; continuing with the wars and famines caused by endless greed, which have led to the unfair accumulation of capital; and ending with the environmental issues of global

17 Aboulela’s depiction refers to the Qur’anic verse “And theirs shall be dark-eyed houris, chaste as virgin pearls” (56:23)
warming and pollution. Spiritual ecologists see spirituality as a solution to these dilemmas. The connection between spirituality and nature here seems to be a development of Sufi views of nature as an epistemological resource (101). Because nature is a site of spiritual reflection and growth, seeing to its well-being is a spiritual duty. Vaughan-Lee sees in Western modernity a violation of the sanctity of the universe, due to its secularism and materialism.

Aboulela’s “Days Rotate” asserts that not only were spiritual subjects alienated in the age of modernity, but the spirituality of the non-human was marginalised by the materiality of modernity. Aboulela puts the following words on the male protagonist’s tongue: “In the old days there were parts of the world where only animals prayed, birds and stones, particles of water and dust. No one could hear them. We were all deaf and busy” (134). The materiality of the human and the division of creatures into rational and irrational creates thick walls between the human and nature. In Aboulela’s depiction of the future mystical life, non-human creatures become expressive; they “curse” the female protagonist, who, exhausted by the climb, decides to descend, leaving herself to the power of gravity (135). Thus, nature may combat human beings for their lust. Aboulela’s Sufi writing seems to be influenced by Kalila Wa Dimna, a collection of legendary stories that gives animals authority over humans. In fact, “Days Rotate” seems to echo Dimna’s reflection that “the pursuit of a superior condition is rigorous, [and] the falling is degrading . . . We should aspire for higher positions and approach them with chivalry; but even after we reach these positions, we should not be content, as we are able to reach higher ones” (78). In “Days Rotate,” animals condemn humans’ lack of awareness and sensitivity. The metaphoric utilisation of animal voices shows that, against the claims of the Enlightenment, reason is not the only source of knowledge. Spirituality, in particular, does not align with the limits of reason, and animals reveal themselves as spiritual guides for those humans who forget their way.

The utilisation of waḥdat al-wujūd as a defence for spirituality in modern times is also depicted by Ibrahim Al-Koni, who, in order to reclaim lost spirituality, wrote on the ontology of such unity as it exists in the desert. The desert in The Bleeding of the Stone functions as a void from modernity. It shines a light on the influence of modernity over the lives of human beings and animals alike, and it accentuates the absence of spirituality. In

18 This remark is generated from the Qur’anic verse that Ibrahim Al-Koni quotes at the beginning of The Bleeding of the Stone: “There are no animals on land or birds flying on their wings, but are communities like your own” (6:38).
19 My translation from the Arabic text.
his book The Philosophy of Desert Metaphors in Ibrahim Al-Koni: The Bleeding of the Stone (2013), Meinrad Calleja explains that

It is not a space that one can easily describe as though one were describing, for example, urban space. It has features that are latent. It stimulates thought. It reveals aspects of reality not otherwise ascertainable. It offers a series of dialects that illustrate latent truths and falsehoods. The barren and empty landscape allows one to see what cannot be otherwise seen; the silence to hear what cannot be heard. (129)

Untouched by modernity, the desert permits Asouf to experience a profound spiritual state, leading to his unification with his father and the waddan, a wild goat (66). Asouf’s solitude in the desert nourishes his spirituality, turning him into a saint. He experiences his spiritual rebirth at the hands of the waddan, who, after Asouf breaks his father’s promise not to hunt the waddan, leads him to an isolated, steep mountain edge and leaves him until his thirst peaks—only to save him just before his death (46-61). After this, the waddan becomes Asouf’s spiritual guide. The notorious greed of human beings is represented in the waddan’s chaser, the meat eater Cain. While searching for the waddan, Cain, to Asouf’s amazement, “cursed” the desert (75). Cain is aloof from the spiritual signs of the desert. In this environment, modernity and its prototypical identification of progressive spaces make nature seem plain. However, for spiritual subjects, nature delivers the voice of the Divine, and the desert serves as a spiritual refuge from the troubles of colonisation and post-colonisation. In short, both Aboulela and Al-Koni represent the desert’s distance from materialistic life as providing a closeness to the mystical one.

Both “Days Rotate” and The Bleeding of the Stone elucidate how the absence of a spiritual bond to the land paves the way for colonisation and neo-colonisation. The spiritual unification with the land blends the two beings, the human and the land, together in an authentic way that exceeds any modern formulation of identity. Murata and Chittick explain how reason diminishes this unity, leading to the exclusion of God from the earthly world—which, in turn, renders human beings “free to deal with it as they like” (334). Overall, for Aboulela, the resistance to colonisation and neo-colonisation centralises the notion of unity with the universe, both temporally and spatially, as a defence against the hegemony of Western power.

20 The discussion of the literary representation of the desert as an ideal space for highlighting the spiritual struggle against materialism will continue in the following chapters. This discussion will refer frequently to Al-Koni’s novel.
4. The Kindness of Enemies and the Sufi History:

Aboulela wrote The Kindness to offer a religious rewriting of the history of Sufism and the resistance to colonisation by following the story of the Sufi Imam Shamil. This novel brings together Aboulela’s two main paradigms: postcolonialism and Sufism. Aboulela’s attempt to approach the tension between spirituality and materialistic modernity stimulated the rewriting of the history of Shamil. The representation of a spiritually devoted model facilitates the questioning of the possibility of a reconciliation between faith and modern-day reality. Furthermore, it provides a historical validation of Sufism’s current alienation. Shamil’s story offers such a reconciliation through his interaction with the Russians, which is marked by two completely different stages of his resistance, or jihad—that is, spiritual and military resistance to Russian colonial onslaught and the spiritual, peaceful resistance that follows the Russian’s victory. For Aboulela, consideration of the latter stage is necessary to realise the modern-day spiritual struggles of the Sufi.

The novel develops in two relatively separate storylines: a contemporary one set in modern-day Scotland and Sudan and a historical one based on the story of Imam Shamil and his struggle against the Russian expansion in the Caucasus. The narrative gives primary attention to the historical part of the novel, as the contemporary characters themselves are drawn into the past. Thus, they are themselves the audience to the other half of the narrative, as if they are there to welcome the reader and prepare him or her for the unfolding of the events from the past which they glorify. The contemporary protagonists search the not-very-distant past for echoes of their own lives, and as they do with the present, they perceive the past in different ways.

The narrative unfolds with Natasha, a Sudanese-Russian historian, who is researching Imam Shamil’s life. Natasha, who was born to a Sudanese father and a Georgian mother, meets a bright student whom those at his university call Oz, and whom his mother, Malak, a descendent of Imam Shamil, calls Ossie (his real name, Osama, is avoided as it is seen as a reminder of Osama Bin Laden) (4). Malak is a Sufi, whose profession as an actor playing minor roles is perceived by Natasha as a “disguise” for her Sufism (314). She and her son have recently moved from London to an isolated farmhouse in Scotland. Natasha visits them on a snowy day to see the sword that the family inherited from Imam Shamil and to obtain more information about their ancestor (3). The record-breaking snow extends her stay to two days (10). While Natasha is at the farmhouse, Oz is arrested on suspicion of terror-related activities (74). During the arrest, the police raid the home and seize Shamil’s sword, the computers, CDs and mobile phones including Natasha’s (77). The e-mails that Oz had exchanged with Natasha, including a research
paper on the weapons used for jihad, redirect the suspicion towards Natasha, who is interrogated and has her office searched by police (167).

Oz is released without charge and decides to leave Scotland for Cardiff, Wales (309). Natasha travels to Sudan to see her dying father but arrives just after he has passed away (245). She spends her time in Sudan reliving childhood memories and is reunited with her childhood friend Yasha and his mother, Aunty Grusha (246). Upon her return to Scotland, Natasha intends to prepare a conference paper on Imam Shamil’s peace efforts, which culminated in his “defeat and surrender” (310). The contemporary story ends with Natasha meeting Malak at Dunnottar Castle near Aberdeen (314). She decides to accept Malak’s invitation to look to Sufism for spiritual and intellectual guidance (314). Her new history writing promises to enable her to write “what could never be written down in history” (311), referring to the new acceptance of Shamil’s Sufism that she has acquired due to her relationship with Malak. Presumably, this qualifies her to narrate the history of Shamil from a non-secular perspective.

The historical storyline commences in the Caucasus region in 1839 with the preparations for a battle against the Russians, who are marching towards Akhulgo (17). Shamil’s army is defeated in the fierce battle for Akhulgo (22), and its loss is amplified by the deaths of Shamil’s second wife Djawarat and their infant son and by the Russians’ kidnapping of his eldest son, Jamaledin, whose mother is Fatima (28, 33). Jamaledin is eight years old when he is taken by the Russians and raised in the court of the Russian Emperor, the Tsar. Jamaledin’s exile results in his transformation into a fine Russian knight. He gradually forgets his mother tongue and Islamic upbringing (56). His love for a Russian girl, Daria, and his need to prove his loyalty to Russia compel him to shed his last sense of belonging to the Caucasus, and he requests the Tsar’s permission to join in the fight against his father (59). However, the Tsar denies his request, as he wishes to save Jamaledin for a peace project with the people of the Caucasus (59).

Meanwhile, Shamil departs for Dargo with his spiritual teacher, Jamal el-Din; his wife, Fatima; his son, Ghazi; and the few men who survived the massacre after the fall of Akhulgo (33). Shamil attempts to secure his son’s release by taking hostages and negotiating an exchange, but he is unsuccessful. His men then invade Tsinondali and take as hostages Anna, the princess of Georgia; her son, Alexander; her infant daughter, Lydia; and Alexander’s French governess, Madame Drancy (78-94). The hostages, apart from Lydia, who falls from her mother’s arms and dies on the way, are taken to Dargo and treated as guests, as per Shamil’s orders (94, 116). They live in Shamil’s house and become acquainted with his wives, Chuanat, a tender-hearted Armenian captive who chose
to marry Shamil after falling in love with him (118); Zeidat, a fanatic with an unpredictable, violent temper, whom Shamil had to marry as a courtesy to her father, Jamal el-Din (151); and Ameena, a young, hasty girl from Bavaria (119). Anna and Madame Drancy suffer due to the rigidity of life in Dargo. The negotiations are delayed by requests for ransom by Shamil’s naibs, or deputies, and wife Zeidat (228). This lengthens and amplifies the hostages’ suffering.

The negotiations finally conclude, and Anna, Alexander and Madame Drancy return to Russia while Jamaledin returns to the Caucasus (239-40). Later, Madame Drancy returns to France and writes a book about Shamil and his people (276). Jamaledin struggles to adapt to his new life, but he soon falls ill with tuberculosis and dies (272-5). Shamil’s military resistance fails to defend the rest of the Caucasus (299). Now in Gunaib, after two weeks under siege, he decides to surrender to the Russians to save the rest of his people (300). He is given a house in Kaluga, where he is reunited with his family, from whom he had been separated since the surrender (300-1). His family now consists of Chuanat, Zeidat, his sons Ghazi and Muhammad-Sheffi, Ghazi’s wife and baby, and his daughters and their husbands (301). Shamil lives ten years in Kaluga before he receives the Tsar’s permission to go on Hajj (304).

The novel ends with Ghazi narrating Shamil’s journey to Makkah and his longing to be with Ghazi, who is denied permission to go on the pilgrimage (317). Ghazi’s narrative offers details about Shamil’s death in Medina, which coincides with Ghazi’s arrival at Makkah, and about the manner in which he receives the news from a dervish in the holy mosque, which the latter had already sensed miraculously (317).

In rewriting the story of Imam Shamil, Aboulela attempts to shed light on the spiritual side of history. The retelling of history from a spiritual perspective can pave the way for resolving the historical alienation of the Sufi. As previously argued, because modern historiography implies using reason to configure the past and find justifications for irrational chronicles, it can neglect spirituality.

The three voices that narrate the novel depict various stages of history: Natasha’s narration of the present; the narration of the past by an unspecified narrator, who can be assumed to be Natasha after her conversion to Sufism; and Ghazi’s narration of the past, with which the novel concludes. The manner in which Shamil’s story is represented in these three sections varies greatly. Ghazi’s narration of Shamil’s journey to Makkah and his death is characterised by a spiritual view of life that recognises mystical incidents, such as the dervish’s prophecy of Shamil’s death, as realistic aspects worth telling. In contrast, Natasha believes in reason and logical justifications for the Caucasian resistance. Her
westernisation, which is highlighted in the novel, shows Aboulela’s view of the way secular historiography is performed in relation to postcolonial and religious histories.

Natasha, the westernised Russian-Sudanese historian, becomes conscious of what she perceives as her shameful difference from the fair complexion of her mother. Born to a white mother and a black father, she develops a phobia of contrasting “composites,” such as “half-human, half-beast” characters (39-40). As she grows older and becomes more knowledgeable, she realises the reason behind this phobia:

The explanation became clearer as I grew older. I was seeing in these awkward composites my own liminal self. The two sides of me that were slammed together against their will, that refused to mix. I was a failed hybrid, made up of unalloyed selves. My Russian mother who regretted marrying my Sudanese father. My African father who came to hate his white wife. My atheist mother who blotted out my Muslim heritage. (40)

Natasha is overwhelmed by the adversity within her racial, cultural and religious inheritance. She feels a deep fracture in her identity due to her inability to integrate such diversity within herself. Her longing for what she sees as a uniform being urges her to change her name from Natasha Hussein to Natasha Wilson (4). Moreover, this crisis affects her career as a historian. Abandoning her father’s name coincides with her internalisation of deeper changes—namely, embracing Western civilisation by detaching herself from the Arabic language, Sudanese culture and Islam. She reflects: “I worked too hard to fit in. To be here and now. That’s how I wanted to appear—topical, relevant, and despite my research interest, inhabiting the present. . . . Better like this, not even Muslim by name” (6). Natasha is determined to be contemporary, and, for her, this connotes being Western.

In fact, Aboulela’s characterisation of Natasha represents the complex inbetweenness of postcolonial historians, who may experience a tension in their unsettled relationship with Islam and the West. Natasha admires both the West and the Islamic struggle against the colonisers. This has a profound influence on her historiography, as she articulates her historiographical perspective: “History can be milked for this cause or that . . . projecting onto it our modern convictions and anxieties” (41). As a result of such duality, she adopts a secular approach to the Muslim resistance against the Russian colonisers in the Caucasus, overlooking the Sufi dimensions of Shamil’s resistance. Natasha’s endeavour to assimilate to Western modernity overpowers her research. Therefore, the history of the conservative Sufis is not written objectively.
By so exemplifying postcolonial historians, Aboulela seems to blame postcolonial historiography for the lack of historical accounts of Sufism. This may be a sound argument when considering the fact that many military leaders of decolonisation wars were Sufi scholars. As Julian Baldick documents, in addition to Shamil, examples of such leaders include ‘Abd Al-Qadir El Djezairi (1807-1883) in Algeria, Sayyid Mohammed Abdullah Hassan (1856-1920) in Somalia, and Muhammad Al-Sanusi (1787-1859) and his son Sayyid Al-Mahdi (1844-1902) in Libya (140-4). They resisted the French and Italian settlers, employing military and spiritual resistance simultaneously. However, historians have underestimated their spiritualty as a dimension of their decolonisation struggle. Consequently, the secular writings on the decolonisation wars in Islamic countries have contributed to the contemporary elimination of Sufism, as influenced by the adoption of the Western anthropological and historical viewpoints of colonisation and decolonisation.

One attribute of such secular writing of history is that the limited accounts of spirituality emphasise the ideological opposition of Sufism and Salafism. The novel depicts the manner in which contemporary Sufis may attribute terrorism to what they perceive as Salafi fundamentalism, whereas the Salafis tend to blame the colonial dilemmas that have befallen the Islamic nations on Sufi spirituality, which they allege encourages passivity. A conversation between Oz, Malak and Natasha depicts this contemporary situation. Malak reflects: “Ever since 9/11, jihad has become synonymous with terrorism. I blame the Wahabis and Salafists for this. Jihad is an internal and spiritual struggle” (8). Oz replies, “Limiting Jihad to an internal struggle has become a bandwagon for every pacifist Muslim to climb on” (8-9). Thus, scriptural Sufism, as Aboulela asserts, becomes almost incomprehensible for the contemporary characters. The contemporary dichotomy between Salafism and Sufism reflects a missing ideological link resulting from the lack of contemporary theorisation of Sufism as well as colonial and neo-colonial cultural and historical domination. Aboulela’s exploration of the spiritual doctrine of Shamil’s history showcases how alien this dichotomy is to the essence of the Sufism that Shamil and his people practise.

Aboulela’s narrative shows that the alteration of Sufism from being militarily and spiritually powerful to being spiritual but militarily passive precedes the emergence of the terrorist outfits that inflict military brutality against their enemies. It draws the reader’s attention to the necessity of avoiding the mistake of limiting Sufism to passivity or equating terrorism with Salafism. In fact, for ideological and military reasons, Sufism was not permitted to evolve either during or after colonisation. This led to the emergence of Islamic movements that adopted one of these forms of power or another.
This polarity is depicted in the struggle of the contemporary characters, Oz and Malak. On one hand, there is Oz, a young zealot whose interest in Shamil is reduced to the weapons of jihad and military violence (12); on the other hand, there is Malak, who is drawn to Imam Shamil’s Sufi practices and accuses the “Wahabis and Salafists” of theorising for terrorism (8). Their mother–son relationship is threatened by this incredibly significant and profound ideological conflict. Aboulela focuses on Malak’s suspicion, which is aroused by Oz’s arrest. She is never certain that Oz did not intend to participate in an act of terrorism. Such doubt prevails in the perspectives of the Islamic schools of thought, despite their shared roots.

As previously discussed, the religious approach to history that this research argues Aboulela sought in writing The Kindness emphasises the fact that historical writing is to be undertaken in pursuit of historical messages. The novel depicts the strong spiritual resistance of Imam Shamil, confirming that his powerful spirituality is his main weapon. One miraculous incident remains a hallmark of his resistance. Djawarat and young Jamaledin retell this story:

‘Remember when he leapt over a line of soldiers who surrounded him’

‘That were just about to fire on him’ The story was in Jamaledin’s mind as if he had been present.

‘He whirled round and struck two with his sword.’

‘Three,’ Jamaledin corrected her.

‘The fourth one hit him but pulled the bayonet blade from his own shoulder’

‘Jumped over a five foot wall.’

‘Seven,’ Djawarat corrected him.

‘In one leap.’ (19)

Shamil’s military resistance stems from, and is governed by, his spirituality. For Aboulela, the fact that spirituality guides his political actions results in disciplined politics. This is an important aspect that the novel seems to communicate equally to contemporary jihadists, whose resistance is depicted as no more than terrorism, and to contemporary Sufis, whose struggle is purely spiritual. The manner in which Shamil’s military resistance is empowered by spirituality is manifested by his ability to defy the Russian army, which exceeds his own in all aspects. When Shamil’s teacher, Jamal el-Din, visits Shamil in his captivity, Shamil says, “I ask myself what went wrong. Almost overnight I lost control”
Shamil’s final defeat is attributed by his teacher to the fact that he becomes “arrogant,” which compels his teacher to stop praying for his victory (305). In this Sufism, arrogance is a significant fault because it contradicts the annihilation of the ego. Jamal el-Din tells Shamil that defeat befell Gunaib a week after he had stopped praying. Shamil reflects: “He had asked the question and received the answer . . . Without spiritual support, nature took its course. Without blessings, without miracles, one and one made two” (305). For Aboulela, in this spiritual struggle, physical means are subordinate to spirituality. Elevating spirituality as the main source of defence asserts both the hardship of writing such a struggle from a secular viewpoint and the distance between this struggle and modern-day ones.

Furthermore, Aboulela draws attention to the way in which Shamil’s military resistance differs from contemporary terrorism. Shamil’s Sufi resistance is based on a combination of power and tolerance, in contrast to the fanatical tendencies of the contemporary terrorist. For example, he tells Chuanat, his Christian wife, that she can keep her religion because they “worship the same God”; however, he sees Islam as a “shorter” way to God (150). Furthermore, Aboulela describes all the wars that he fought against the Russians as being “on the defence” (9) rather than a quest for political power. Thus, for Aboulela, Shamil’s jihad is a spiritual and military reaction to a cultural and military colonisation.

Shamil’s struggle is established in relation to a spiritual perspective of life. It is accompanied by a fear of failure, because colonisation may dismantle the spiritual orientation: “If only they would leave us in peace,” Shamil says prior to a battle (20). For Shamil, military power is a method of securing a spiritual milieu. Discussing the Sufi anticolonial missions in North Africa, Badlock describes such anxious speculations about the colonial threats as follows: “If the holy war against the unbeliever failed, how should one view those Muslims who found themselves under no-Muslim rule? Should modern Western ideas and institutions now be adopted?” (140). This highlights the way the struggle is perceived from the side of the Caucasians. For them, spiritual resistance is necessary to guarantee the survival of their spirituality.

The novel confirms that Shamil aims to establish a territory akin to a spiritual utopia by banning all material distractions, such as music and wine (262). Nevertheless, realising the limited potential for victory, Shamil stops fighting the Russians in order to preserve the safety of the community and its spiritual practice. This distinguishes him significantly from contemporary terrorists, who pursue aggression and destruction. When Ghazi kneels in front of him to persuade him to surrender, he reflects: “The longer Ghazi
knelt before him, the more selfish martyrdom became; the longer Ghazi knelt the clearer it dawned that this was defeat and that defeat was Allah’s will” (300). He sacrifices by giving up martyrdom. He accepts living like a hostage under the cultural and political domination of Russia to sustain the survival of his people and their spiritual practice. The novel’s depiction of Shamil’s struggle shows that when spirituality is at the core of military action, it controls and directs this action.

Shamil’s attempt to avoid the looming destruction, his surrender and his captivity are all emphasised by Aboulela as delivering a message of crucial importance for present spiritual struggles. For Aboulela, spiritual subjects are held hostage by secular modernity, and physical resistance is not feasible; only the alternation of days can liberate them. Therefore, as the novel seems to suggest, Sufis may rely on the conviction of their religious views of history. Surrendering to the domination of secular modernity is justified by the impossibility of defying secular domination of contemporary human civilisation. This perspective, as the discussion in the following chapter will reveal, is particularly highlighted in relation to Aboulela’s protagonists living in the West. The novel offers a glimpse into Shamil’s spiritual resistance, which comes after his surrender. This resistance is manifested in the spiritual retreat he embarks upon while living in Russia: “There was a sense of peace in this. To be told don’t fight any more, you have done enough, stand aside, stand aside and worship. That is how he interpreted his defeat in Gunaib. It was a command from the Almighty to stand aside and worship because the years were running out” (302). Shamil’s Sufism supports him through the political dismantlement by providing a mystical justification for the defeat. Shamil’s perception of surrender as an eventual Divine invitation to spiritual devotion seems to be shaped by his yearning for the past: “Together they [Shamil and Ghazi al-Gimrawi] had stood up in prayer and gone into seclusion; together they chanted and studied” (161). This longing highlights that the idealisation of the past with regard to spirituality is not completely a contemporary tendency. More evidently, the rise and decline of Shamil’s military power, both depicted as products of his spiritual state, confirms that even celebrated spiritual reigns may meet their demise because of a spiritual defect.

While Shamil’s captivity is loosely physical, depicted by the delay of permission to travel on Hajj (317), it is, in fact, more cultural and religious. His Sufism enables him to detach from the material pleasures that the Russians utilise to seduce him and ensure his alliance with them (302). The narrative confirms that he refuses to own any of the leisure

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21 Ghazi Muhammad ibn Isma’il al-Gimrawi (1795-1832), an Avar imam, a friend of Shamil and a student of Jamal el-Din.
objects given to him by the Tsar, either giving them away or destroying them (302). He is a cultural hostage of a modern empire; for him, spirituality is the sole method of agency.

In Aboulela’s aforementioned works as well as in Minaret, which will be examined in the third chapter, spirituality remains the main method of resistance to colonial and neocolonial captivity. For her, Shamil’s surrender, aimed at ensuring the survival of his spiritual ideology and its delivery to future generations, makes the rotation of days a reality. The section of the novel set in the present depicts how Shamil’s Sufi ideology survives and gains a presence in modern-day London. Although “tame” (217), stripped of much of its political power and reduced to a dhikr ritual, it transgresses cultural, social and national boundaries. The attendants of this ritual include “[d]umpy Asian housewives, extravagantly handsome Nigerian men, hippies and New Agers” (217). This represents how the surviving spirituality reaches intellectually, religiously and socially diverse people in need of spiritual support (217). This survival is essential to Aboulela, because without Shamil’s surrender this practice could have been forgotten with the mass annihilation of his followers. Although Shamil’s victory comes many centuries after his death, it comes overwhelmingly when his message permeates the secular, modern society in London.

5. Conclusion:

The enforcement of Western secular modernity in the postcolonial world causes a return to the past, which spiritualises humans’ relationships with time, nature and the land. In “Days Rotate,” the protagonists’ journey to heaven is, in fact, a search for the mystical space of infinite time. Their climbing is associated with a detachment from worldly pleasures and an increase in devotion. The more they distance themselves from materialism, the nearer they come to the infinite, mystical realm. Similarly, the Sufi ascetic approach is a method of approaching the absolute, of escaping one timescale and reaching another and of leaving the finite, physical earth to reach the infinite, mystical heaven.

The Western notion of time as linear, as well as the division of time into small, comprehensible units, has resulted in a belief in human mastery of time. However, spiritual subjects see their lives as being overpowered by the periodic and extensive turns of mystical time. In a practical sense, the spiritual subjects’ present succumbs to that of Western civilisation because physical time asserts the importance of the lived present. In contrast, the spiritual subjects approach the present as a short piece of the eternal, fixed fate, according to which individuals cannot change their present completely because it is largely the fruit of their collective religious deeds. In Aboulela’s writings, estrangement from the present results in an increasing concern about the mystical past and future. The ability to claim the spirituality of these two temporal domains can liberate the present.
By existing between two materialistic reigns, the spiritual life in “Days Rotate” represents the brief return of a spiritual civilisation. Although “Days Rotate” has been long neglected—and is considered, alongside “Radia’s Carpet”, to be “arguably unsuccessful” by Claire Chambers (88)—it functions as the dense epitome of Aboulela’s spiritual rhetoric. Chambers did not approach the text as a Sufi one, but as an example of science fiction, which justifies this perspective. Attempting to read the text in a different framework from the one in which it was originally written resulted in Chambers’ reading of the ecological aspects of the story as a refusal of scientific developments and a longing for a pre-modern religious utopia. In The Kindness, Aboulela attempts to re-approach the spiritual struggle that she initiated in “Days Rotate” by exploring the spiritual, ideal past by rewriting Shamil’s story. This scrutiny showcases the sufferings and sorrows that never cease to challenge his spiritual devotion. The rewriting of the past offers realistic details to de-idealise that past. The past is inhabited, like the present, by hardships and obstacles to spiritual devotion. Like contemporary Sufis, Shamil and his people long for their own ideal past and find solace in the rotation of time. The religious perspective of history proves that there is no completely perfect time for spirituality.

The spiritual power with which Imam Shamil fights is a realisation of the one represented in “Days Rotate.” The religious narration of history provides a new perspective on spiritual powers and miracles. It emphasises that such spiritual powers can be realistic. However, they are rendered symbolic due to the language of modernity. Modernity applies rational patterns to religious experiences, conceptualising such mystical elements as subjective conceits at best or hallucinations at worst. Depriving spiritual power of its impact leaves religious resistance modelled either as passive retreat or terrorist aggression. Nonetheless, the contemporary section of the novel is narrated by a secular voice that serves as a representation of the dominance of secularism over contemporary intellectual debates.

Ultimately, Aboulela’s Sufi postcolonial writing merges two different perspectives on Western modernity as well as two different ways of “writing back”: the postcolonial and the Sufi views. These perspectives evolve in Aboulela’s writing because of her notion of writing from the past to decolonise the present. These two perspectives result in a fundamental anti-Modern Sufi direction. Aboulela’s Sufi writing evinces that “writing back” to colonial discourse while inhabiting a completely different age results in a fundamental view of the issue under scrutiny, as occurs in Aboulela’s discussion of surrender. Galvanised by neo-colonisation, her representation of cultural interactions takes a fundamental position that reflects ideas of cultural restraint.
Chapter 3: Religious Agency in Leila Aboulela’s Feminist Discourse

1. Introduction:

The previous chapter discussed Aboulela’s depiction of the spiritual estrangement of Sufi subjects resulting from the domination of secular modernity. Aboulela’s feminist discourse tends to convey an association of spiritual and feminist views from a postcolonial standpoint. This chapter reads Aboulela’s The Kindness (2015), Minaret (2005) and “Days Rotate” (2001) and attempts to engage with her perspective of women’s agency within this framework. The discussion of some points compels a revisitation of Aboulela’s other texts, such as Lyrics Alley (2010), “Radia’s Carpet” (2001) and “Make Your Own Way Home” (2001). In addition, this chapter refers to Leo Tolstoy’s Hadji Murat (1912, 2012) and to Hanan al-Shaykh’s The Locust and the Bird (2009) to facilitate a thorough discussion of the historical and feminist dimensions of Aboulela’s novels. Aboulela’s writing shows how contemporary women’s agency is complicated by many historical, political and social circumstances.

Before embarking on the discussion, it is necessary to establish some background knowledge about Aboulela’s discourse and her perspective on patriarchy. For Aboulela, the problematic tension between the secular and the religious that accompanies the conceptualisation of religious agency is irresolvable. This tension is emphasised through the imposition of secularism as the sole vehicle to modernity via colonisation and neo-colonisation. The tension leaves its mark on Aboulela’s portrayal of the religious agency of Najwa in Minaret and Malak and Natasha in The Kindness, whose agentic acts are purely spiritual and therefore internal and private. Although it can be seen as a realistic reflection of the situation of postcolonial Muslim women, Aboulela’s privatisation of religious agency is strongly criticised by Sadia Abbas in her article “Leila Aboulela, Religion and the Challenge of the Novel” (2011):

The attributes that allow [Aboulela’s] novels to be designated as Muslim and halal are thoroughly secular, by which I mean that they have little to say about divinity and bracket theological questions and the more troubling effects of religion on the world. In their chaste and narrow romantic focus, they make religion private. Secularism, it turns out, is constitutive of their halal goodness. (455)
This view can be justified by Aboulela’s representation of religious characters, such as Najwa, as lacking intellectual maturity, which facilitates the avoidance of the epistemological complications suggested by Abbas. Aboulela does not aim to pose such questions due to her position of seeing textual traditions as sacred. However, Aboulela’s narrative relates to the secular in a much more complex way than the apologetic strategy recounted by Abbas. Her depiction of contemporary characters conforms to the essential purpose of representing the limits of ideological resources available for these characters. In particular, the ideological situation of these characters is affected by the struggle between contemporary Salafism and Sufism, leading to a lack of firm ground in relation to which religious agentic models can be identified. On the one hand, the rise of violent religious extremism seen by Aboulela as being caused by this disparity has its say in these characters’ struggle for agency. On the other hand, the lack of a contemporary and powerful association between modern-day Sufism and its ideological roots causes Muslim women’s religious agency to become entangled with secular approaches to Islamic tradition. Meanwhile, her non-contemporary characters—such as the unnamed female narrator of “Days Rotate,” Radia, Dia’ and Taghreed in “Radia’s Carpet” and the characters within the past section of The Kindness—are depicted as experiencing a form of ideological certainty, even though such certainty does not necessarily eliminate obstacles or spiritual challenges.

Aboulela’s engagement with the ideological deterioration of Islamic schools in the postcolonial world stems from the struggles within postcolonial Sudan. For Aboulela, Sufism represents the original form of Islam practised by the Sudanese prior to the Islamisation of the state. In a personal interview, Aboulela spoke about her relationship with Sufism, explaining that Sufism was introduced peacefully to Sudan from North Africa (1). In her view, the rise of political Islam in 1989, which was achieved through a coup supported by the Muslim Brotherhood, led to a decline in the popularity of Sufism in contemporary Sudan (1). This view is historically valid. In “Islamism in the Sudan: Who Was the Challenger, What Was at Stake?” (2011) Stefano Bellucci explains that the 1989 coup led by General Omar Hassan al Bashir was associated with the National Islamic Front (NIF), which is the Muslim Brotherhood’s political party (125-6). This party associated nationalism with religion, calling for a unified Islamic nation and an abolition of all Sufi orders (126). Aboulela’s nostalgic account does not mean that she supports this Sufism completely. She criticised this traditional un-informed Sufism as involving superstitions (Lyrics Alley 60). However, the struggle between the two streams continues to inspire her narrative, compelling her to raise questions regarding the contemporary attributes of past ideological and political violence.
In addition to ideological tensions, the political and economic dynamics of colonisation negatively affect Aboulela’s main female characters. Many of these characters are Sudanese expatriates whose migration is caused by political and economic instability in Sudan. In Minaret, Najwa reflects on the situation of her country and wonders what having “a stable country” feels like, “[a] country that was familiar, reassuring background, a static landscape on which to paint dreams” (165). For Aboulela, this ideological, political and economic deterioration influences gender relations by weakening the supportive patriarchy, which she believes is necessary to women’s agency. This position will be discussed in relation to the character of Anwar, a political figure in Minaret who is marked by selfishness and narrowmindedness and whose opportunistic relationship with Najwa leads to her spiritual awakening.

The investigation of Aboulela’s texts in the previous chapter showed how the author establishes a religious approach to the past. This chapter attempts to discuss how this approach shapes Aboulela’s feminist discourse, which resists the hegemony of contemporary secular notions of agency. The following examination traces how Aboulela engages with religious agency while writing as a Muslim migrant to the West. More specifically, this investigation considers how Aboulela critically approaches modern social sciences and social structures through her Sufism. Such an approach is manifest in the present and past sections of her last book, The Kindness (2015), and in Minaret (2005). Approaching Aboulela’s feminist discourse within her Sufi paradigm assists in understanding her view of the way the past tends to inform the contemporary sources of agency available to postcolonial subjects.

1.1 Aboulela’s Perspective of Patriarchy:

Aboulela advocates a religious-based patriarchy, which she describes in an interview with Peter Cherry as “benevolent … strong … and nurturing to the women” (6). Aboulela’s view of this patriarchy is derived exclusively from the Islamic concept of qiwamah, or the degree of authority over women granted to men by Shari’a law. Aboulela perceives the patriarch’s authority over the moral and material affairs of women as legitimate. For example, in Minaret, she puts the following words on Shahinaz’s tongue: “When I think of a man I admire, he would have to know more than me, be older than me. Otherwise I wouldn’t be able to look up to him. Otherwise how can you listen to him or let him guide you?” (215). This masculine authority and its conditions of age and knowledge are not specific to the context of this statement, made during a conversation about Najwa’s affair with Tamer, but seem to be common threads in Aboulela’s positive view of patriarchy.
She sees patriarchy that conforms to this framework as supportive and performing an essential role in women’s religious agency. The influence of a patriarch is necessary for women to fulfil their moral and religious duties. Her aforementioned argument that women need male “nurturing”, “guidance” and “benevolence” encourages a gender hierarchy, and she does not challenge the misogynist aspects of this hierarchy, which assume women’s vulnerability and undermine their ability to perform their roles independently. Aboulela does not value independence and freedom as necessary to women’s agency but rejects them as principles of the secular view of agency. In her article “Restraint? Sure. Oppressed? Hardly” (2007), she states that the Islamic notion of freedom disciplines but does not oppress women: “Boundaries can be comforting and nurturing. Freedom does not necessarily bring happiness, nor [does] an abundance of choices automatically mean that we will make the right one” (4). Aboulela perceives some aspects of freedom as negative, such as opposition to faithful submission to Divine will.

Aboulela’s negative view of freedom is best portrayed in her two short stories, “Days Rotate” and “Radia’s Carpet.” In the latter, she suggests that the Sufi masters’ most appreciated piece of wisdom is to “rein in your ego, ride it, don’t let it ride you” (147). Aboulela presents mastering the ego as integral to women’s agency. The female protagonist’s struggle to achieve religious agency in “Days Rotate” parallels her journey to climb a mountain. Her climb is analogous to her increasing submission, manifested in her attempts to “empty” herself (131). The protagonist’s desire to approach heaven motivates her submission, and her efforts to disempower the ego in favour of spirituality marginalise the entire question of women’s rights, represented as an egocentric aspiration for agency. Thus, in “Days Rotate,” women submit to the will not of their husbands—as Wail S. Hassan argues in his 2008 article “Leila Aboulela and the Ideology of Muslim Immigrant Fiction” (314)—but of the Divine. This distinction is crucial for Aboulela as it positions patriarchy within a religious framework rather than a traditional framework. The former is agentic, but the latter is oppressive.

Aboulela’s view of patriarchy arises from her Sufi orientation. Women’s ego-free obedience to textual traditions has religious motivations to which patriarchy is peripheral. Unsurprisingly, her fiction represents feminist ideologies as a source of danger to the mystical community, promoting standards of power and possession. “Radia’s Carpet” even expresses a mystical form of gender equality. As Dia’, the son of a Great War hero, and Taghreed, a strong, ambitious girl, compete for the prayer carpet of the female mystic, Radia, armed solely with their spiritual powers, gender emerges as an irrelevant consideration. Dia’, humble and egoless, ponders: “Maybe Radia’s carpet should go to a
It would be fair [for it to go] from one woman to another” (143). Taghreed repeats this thought, but this standard is proven wrong when Dia’ wins the carpet (147). This story expresses Aboulela’s view that gender has no significance in spiritual life because spirituality does not support gendered standards. The gendered body occupies the core position of the feminist debate, but Aboulela disregards material standards of agency because of her engagement spiritual agency.

This position is problematic because gender relations cannot be completely detached from their materialistic dimension. Even the concept of qiwamah from which Aboulela derives her view of patriarchy is profoundly shaped by gender roles related to the body: Men’s physical superiority justifies the material support they provide women, which includes both protection and financial provision. Such views can lead to a misogynist patriarchy that essentialises male material superiority while disregarding moral responsibilities. Aboulela’s elaboration of patriarchy within the mystical utopia of these two stories, in contrast, is idealist. Positioning patriarchy in the profane, however, reveals the unavoidable interaction between the material and the misogynist aspects of patriarchy. For example, in Minaret, as the discussion of the novel will show, Najwa being a girl negatively affects the way her father contributes to her upbringing (78). Aboulela believes that traditional patriarchy hinders women’s agency, but supportive patriarchy is unattainable due to the social, political and historical flaws of the postcolonial world.

She depicts postcolonialism as having a great impact on gender relations, not only by complicating women’s emancipation with colonial claims of saving them but also by influencing its male subjects. This perspective drives Aboulela’s representation of patriarchy in nineteenth-century Caucasus in The Kindness. Shamil practices supportive patriarchy due to his religious knowledge and moral insight. In contrast, the absence of this patriarchy in Minaret results in the protagonist’s suffering. Aboulela describes the latter novel as “a critique of patriarchy in the Muslim world … that patriarchy is no longer functioning as it used to” (Interview with Cherry 6).

Aboulela’s notion of supportive patriarchy thus extends across two timescales: the mystical future and the precolonial past. Her narrative of the struggles for agency undertaken by contemporary women shows that their suffering is exacerbated by the loss of supportive patriarchy. Aboulela does not engage in feminist attempts to negotiate or soften gender hierarchies or see them as harmful to women’s agency. Conditioning supportive patriarchy on men’s penchant for justice recalls the argument on the similarities between patriarchy and slavery discussed in chapter 1. Control of slaves and women is justified by their alleged inferiority and is indisputable as long as it causes no harm. Unlike most scholars who engage with patriarchy to refute it, Aboulela seems to use the
comparison of patriarchy and slavery to simply challenge the correlation made between women’s agency and freedom of choice, which she rejects as secular. This view will be revisited shortly in relation to Najwa’s wish to be Tamer’s “concubine” (215). It is necessary here to state that Aboulela does not endorse slavery or misogyny. Her position arises primarily from her wish to find a way to completely affiliate oneself with textual traditions in order to contest the secular elements that permeate religious agency. Although this tendency is characteristic of Aboulela’s fiction, it is compromised in The Kindness when religious affiliations become privatised rather than communal.

In The Kindness, the female protagonists’ agentic experiences are affected by their veneration of the past. However, their admiration of Imam Shamil, whose views of gender relations are strictly hierarchical, shows an ambivalent perspective in terms of what aspects of the past are retrieved. Aboulela’s feminist writing defines and emphasises historical boundaries in terms of gender relations. Her attempt to read patriarchal aspects of gender relations within their immediate context prevents feminist questions of justice from being channelled chronologically from past to present and vice versa. Therefore, her two female protagonists, Malak and Natasha, do not aspire to retrieve past models of women’s agency, nor do they attempt to follow the agentic experiences of Shamil’s wives because their desire to pursue Shamil’s spirituality remains detached from his ideas about gender relations. Aboulela’s appreciation of the anti-colonial past did not restrict the patterns of agency to those available in that past.

Natasha’s agency is negatively affected by her father, a traditional and secular patriarch who attempts to enforce his perspective of morality on Natasha and her mother. Inherently weak and neglectful with accumulating financial and social deficiencies, he is seen by Natasha as responsible for the failure of her parents’ marriage (139). He interrupts her mother’s career by forcing her to quit her job as a physiotherapist (136). His decision is not based on a moral logic but on his idea of “shame,” nor was it compensated by his support of her financial commitments (136). As a child, Natasha suffers in the chasm between the lifestyles her parents live. She recalls a thought she had after a silent and depressive evening with her father, in which the only entertainment he could offer her was a sip of his alcoholic drink: “I felt that I was [my mother’s] accomplice. . . the first rung on the ladder of opportunity, and my father was the one we both kicked away” (139). His contradictory moral views and inability to care for his family designates him as a misogynist patriarch. He is depicted as the main reason for Natasha’s spiritual and cultural exile.
Aboulela’s engagement with issues of patriarchy is related to the manner in which patriarchy is conceptualised within its immediate context. Her belief in the justice of a patriarchy that is derived from and restricted by qiwamah as well as the absence of this patriarchy in the modern day creates a duality of feminist standpoints within her fiction. Although, as the following section will show, questions of just treatment of women in the past were based on women’s ability to have access to Shari’a law, which permits them to differentiate between supportive and misogynist patriarchy, in the present, questions of justice are complicated by women’s spiritual, economic and intellectual capacities to react to the predominance of misogynist patriarchy. With the absence of supportive patriarchy, as previously argued, contemporary Muslim women can be victimised by a traditional misogynist understanding of qiwamah.

Aboulela’s approval of supportive patriarchy runs contrary to Arab feminists such as Hanan al-Shaykh, who condemn all patriarchal aspects of gender relations. Hanan al-Shaykh’s novel, The Locust and the Bird (2009), translated from the Arabic Hikayti Sharhun Yatul (2005), narrates Kamila’s story of resistance to the misogynist patriarchy. The novel is narrated from the perspective of Kamila, Hanan’s mother. Because Kamila is illiterate, she asks Hanan to write her story, which she narrates to Hanan (16). Kamila is oppressed by her forced marriage to her devout brother-in-law, Abu-Hussein, who is thirty years her senior (84). Already deserted by her father, this marriage is a necessity for her family, which consists of her mother, her full brother Kamil, half-brother Ibrahim, and Ibrahim’s wife and children, in order to continue receiving Abu-Hussein’s financial support after the death of his first wife, Manifa (54). Kamila strives to terminate this marriage in order to unite with her beloved Muhammad. Meanwhile, she secretly resumes her relationship with her lover, investing in every opportunity that can bring them together.

Abu-Hussein was orphaned at the age of six and brought up and educated by a Shi’i Muslim scholar (56). At the age of twelve, he decided to travel to Beirut to work and support himself (56). Kamila, on the other hand, is illiterate. Her attempts to persuade her mother and Abu-Hussein to permit her to go to school are in vain (59), and her childhood and illiteracy are utilised by her family and husband to walk her into marriage without her knowledge (58). At the age of eleven, she is asked to appear in front of some male visitors and say, “You are hereby my witness,” which she does inadvertently (58). Later, her mother convinces her that this process is “nothing more than a mock marriage for religious purposes . . . so that God would not punish you if your brother-in-law saw you without a headscarf” (70). Kamila’s forced marriage is undertaken in the name of religion. Not only is it endorsed by the “turbaned sheikh” (69), but her family also utilises religious concepts
to deceive her. Her lack of knowledge of Shari’a, which is natural in her situation, amplifies her vulnerability. In al-Shaykh’s novel, the approached past is one of victimisation. Kamila’s opportunities to exit this marriage are integral to the individuality that she could not gain. Her family’s financial dependency on Abu-Hussein makes her a scapegoat.

The narrative of Kamila’s life begins in 1932. Kamila belongs to an impoverished class of villagers who moved to Beirut to work after the French Mandate. As a new resident in Beirut, she is isolated and mocked by other children (41). Her struggle with misogynist patriarchy is caused mainly by her poverty and illiteracy.

Within such circumstances, in al-Shaykh’s novel, spirituality is ineffective in terms of amending the patriarch’s moral deficiencies. In fact, this religiosity is depicted as a form of bigotry that legitimises the desire to control and manipulate women. Kamila states that:

[I]looking at the stream and the waterwheel I exclaimed, ‘God, see how beautiful it is – just like the River Litani!’ [Abu-Hussein] rounded on me, telling me I must say instead, ‘God is powerful over all things. He is the Creator of the heavens and the earth.’ I was angry. Now I could not even remark on the beauty of something without being told off. (93)

In al-Shaykh’s novel, all forms of patriarchy are misogynist. That is, she does not, nor did her mother, hold the same perspective as Aboulela, who approves of the degree of authority assigned to men over women through qiwamah, nor does she see in religious agency a form of empowerment. Rather, as she writes in her introduction to the novel, and as her own resistance of her father’s control reveals (5, 8), Al-Shaykh advocates gender equality as a cornerstone of women’s liberation. Her view of gender relations does not seem to be derived from an affiliation to a particular religious school, Shi’ism, but from a secular one.

The agentic struggle of the educated, westernised Natasha, living in twenty-first-century Scotland, is essentially different from that of the illiterate Kamila, living in twentieth-century Beirut. This difference, which reflects social, political and economic values, complicates the manner in which Aboulela’s notion of supportive patriarchy is represented as, ideally, offering possible empowerment to all Muslim women despite their widely variable circumstances. The two authors depict women’s circumstances as producing different forms of patriarchy and different reactions to it. In these novels, supportive and misogynist patriarchies are separated by more than historical and spatial boundaries, and women’s knowledge of Shari’a law, along with their education, evidently
guard them from being exploited by clarifying their rights as well as the limits of the
dominant family’s control.

2. Historiography and Gender Relations in The Kindness of Enemies:

The past section of The Kindness is consolidated around the kidnapping of Shamil’s son,
Jamaleldin. The besieged Akhulgo is in a fierce battle against the Russians, and
negotiations with the enemy require a hostage as a sign of good faith (22). Jamaleldin is
kidnapped by the Russians after the negotiations fail. As he endeavours to retrieve his son,
Shamil kidnaps the Georgian Princess Anna; her children; and their governess, Madame
Drancy, to initiate a process of negotiation and exchange. The novel revolves around the
narration of the hostages’ suffering as well as Shamil’s battles against the Russians. The
discussion in this section engages with the subjectivity of historical writing and the
implications of this writing on the depiction of past models of women’s agency. This
discussion facilitates the examination of the impact of this history on contemporary
religious women’s agency in the following sections.

A century before Aboulela’s work, Leo Tolstoy drew on his experience to write the
novella Hadji Murat (1912, 2012), a reference to which is of substantial importance to the
reading of Aboulela’s historical novel. Reading the two texts side by side allows a
reflection on how anti-colonial struggles can be written with a subversive attitude.
Aboulela pays attention throughout the novel to contesting Orientalist narratives. Although
she did not refer directly to Tolstoy’s novella as an object of subversion, when speaking of
Tolstoy’s Hadji Murat in an interview, she explained that she holds an adverse opinion of
his description of Shamil (Aboulela, Edinburgh International Book Festival 2015).
Tolstoy’s narration is important as a counternarrative to Aboulela’s in terms of the two
authors’ descriptions of Shamil’s and Hadji Murat’s characters. In addition to their
historical views, the literary works seem to conflict in terms of their representations of
gender relations in the Caucasus.

Hadji Murat is a posthumously published novella. Tolstoy started writing it nearly
fourty-five years after his meeting with Hadji Murat took place (Pevear ix). He derived the
factual material of the story from eyewitness accounts and from his interviews with
Russian figures (Pevear x, 4). The novella also contains some fictional elements (4). As
Richard Pevear indicates in his introduction to the novella, which he translated with
Larissa Volokhonsky, Tolstoy said that he wrote the novella “in secret from himself” (ix).
This is explained further by Pevear as follows: “it contradicted all the aesthetic, moral, and
spiritual principles he had been formulating since 1880. It testifies . . . his irrepressible
need for artistic creation. He would not allow it to be published during his lifetime” (ix, x).
The novella has certainly attracted the attention of readers not only due to its controversial content but also due to its historical and geographical context, seen by many as providing an accurate account of the historical events of the nineteenth-century Russian–Caucasian struggle.

Tolstoy writes the novella in sympathy with Hadji Murat. He therefore depicts Shamil negatively. This bias was stimulated by another, more important factor: Tolstoy’s nationalist ambitions for imperialist Russia. The novella praises the rebellious Chechen Murat, who resisted Imam Shamil’s control. Even though Hadji Murat’s ambitions were partially personal, including an old blood feud between him and Shamil, Hadji Murat’s interest in power and resistance to the authoritarian role of Shamil and his subsequent suffering was established by Tolstoy as a heroic act. Tolstoy’s admiration and empathy were amplified when Hadji Murat sought refuge in an alliance with the Russian Empire (39). Hadji Murat urged the Russians to support him in his quest to defeat their mutual enemy and free his family, who had been taken hostage by Shamil (59), but was disappointed by the Russians’ hesitation. This urged Hadji Murat to ride to the Caucasus to rescue his family (109), only to be followed by the Russians and killed after a brief fight between the two sides (112-6).

Tolstoy wrote his novella in grief for the deceased rebel and to express a sense of regret for the unjust treatment he received from imperial Russia. Tolstoy begins the novella reflectively by meditating on his encounter with a beautiful “Tartar” flower, which he leaves after his attempts to pick it damage the blossom (4). He disposes of it because it does not fit with his bouquet of flowers due to its “coarseness and gaudiness” (4). Afterward, he passes by another “Tartar” flower that had been partially crushed by the field’s mower (4). The flower’s strength, its exoticness and isolation, and Tolstoy’s sense of guilt for ruining it remind him of the story of Hadji Murat. He reflects: “Man has conquered everything, destroyed millions of plants, but this one still does not surrender” (4). Tolstoy begins his memoir of Hadji Murat’s story and his own travels to the Caucasus as a young soldier with a romantic reflection that equates Hadji Murat with a crushed Tartar flower: “As if a piece of its flesh had been ripped away, its guts turned inside out, an arm torn off, an eye blinded. But it still stands and does not surrender to man, who has annihilated all its brothers around it” (4). Tolstoy views Hadji Murat’s resistance to imperial Russia as an act of heroism worth retelling.

Tolstoy’s reflections on Hadji Murat’s struggle intersect with his Romantic criticism of the way the Enlightenment permits man to destroy nature—a tendency that was, as Austin Jersild asserts in his book Orientalism and Empire: North Caucasus
Mountain Peoples and the Georgian Frontier 1845–1917 (2002), popular among Orientalist Russian writers in the late nineteenth century (61-2). Jersild explains that the literary movement towards Romanticism inclined many Russian authors to travel to the Caucasus after the fall of Imam Shamil and write about their heroic adventures (61). In many cases, the heroism was integral to the travellers’ endurance of the “primitivity” of their neighbours (61, 136). However, Tolstoy’s account does not conform completely to this direction of writing (136). Hadji Murat shows hints of Tolstoy’s disappointment and criticism of most Russian officers and the Tsar himself for their materialism and immorality (Tolstoy 67, 96).

Despite the novella’s divergence from Oriental historiography, Hadji Murat, especially in relation to Shamil’s Sufism and his reign, remains a product of its time and place. The “colonial imagination” of the “civilised” Russia that endeavours to create a new “civilised” Caucasus leaves a recognisable prejudice, not only against Shamil, whose military resistance made him a bitter enemy of imperial Russia, but even against Hadji Murat. In particular moments in the novella, as this study will shortly reveal, the representation of gender relations in the Caucasus disqualifies both Shamil and Hadji Murat from being capable of reflecting a “civilised” humanitarian perspective equal to that of the Russians.

According to Tolstoy’s account, Hadji Murat’s continuing defiance is caused by his blood feud with Shamil, who killed Hadji Murat’s brothers, Osman and Abununtsal Khan (22, 57). The spark that ignited their ultimate struggle is described by Tolstoy: Shamil refused to nominate Hadji Murat as his successor, and when Murat resisted his displacement, Shamil confiscated his money (59). This narrative leaves no space for Shamil’s defence as he is represented here as a tyrant, especially because Shamil’s intention, as narrated by Aboulela, was to appoint his son Ghazi as his successor (The Kindness 65). Tolstoy’s sympathy for Hadji Murat as a rebel against Shamil seems to be related to the potential agentic aspects of Hadji Murat’s political resistance. Shamil’s application of extreme punishments derived from the Shari’a, including the death penalty, runs counter to the “civilised” political system Tolstoy promoted. Tolstoy once wrote to Nicholas II, proposing political and religious reform that followed the Swedish models of parliament and the Protestant church (Tolstoy, “The Czar Nicholas II” 281). The Tsar accepted the notion of a parliament but refused religious reform (478). Tolstoy viewed this refusal as caused by the Tsar’s religious “fanaticism” (281).

Tolstoy’s political ideology is prevalent in Hadji Murat as well. In this novella, he praises the emergence of an intellectual and political rebellion against the Russian tsar
The justified resistance of this movement is emphasised by Tolstoy’s portrayal of the corruption, naivety and narcissism of the Russian Tsar Nicholas I, who governed from 1825 to 1855. In Hadji Murat, Tolstoy depicts Nicholas as thinking about “[t]hose empty people who talked not only of science and poetry, but also about governing themselves better than he [Nicholas I] governed them. He knew, however much he quashed these people, they surfaced again and again” (68). The agency of rebellious individuals is highlighted through their resistance of the tsar’s swift power and authoritarianism. As a conflict between a peaceful resistance of intellectual, enlightened individuals and powerful, fanatic authoritarians, this struggle has modern connotations, situating reason and modern civility in opposition to political religions. Tolstoy perceives Hadji Murat’s resistance to reveal some shared elements with the political resistance in Russia. That is, Tolstoy approves of Hadji Murat’s refusal of Shamil’s power as legitimate resistance in the face of Shamil’s authoritarian rule and his extreme version of Shari’a law.

However, Tolstoy recognises that Hadji Murat is not opposed to Shamil’s interpretation of Shari’a. His resistance is based on personal rather than ideological reasons. Therefore, Hadji Murat is not qualified to be an equal with Russian modern agents. At any rate, Hadji Murat’s religiosity does not conform to Tolstoy’s notion of the ideal religion. In fact, his religiosity, according to Tolstoy, sparks the suspicions of the Russian officers who accompany and support him through his alliance. In a letter sent by Prince Vorontsov to the Tsar informing him of Hadji Murat’s surrender and his requirements, the prince confirms that the sole factor that may be of potential risk to their relation with him is “his attachment to his religion” (63). The prince indicates that religion could be the last bond between Hadji Murat and Shamil that the latter could use to influence Hadji Murat (63). Tolstoy sees the two broadly as fanatics, though Hadji Murat’s resistance and suffering distinguish him from the brutal Shamil.

Shamil’s Sufism is associated in the Orientalist Russian mentality with traditional, uninformed and inhumane practices. It is, more specifically, viewed as producing a form of gender relations that are oppressive to women. After his surrender, Shamil is confronted by a Russian official about the situation of women in his household and is reported as insisting that “female inferiority in all respects was ordained by Allah” (Jersild 121). Jersild explains that the Russian view of gender relations in the Caucasus, which was upheld and propagated by Orientalist travellers, combines the image of oppressed Muslim women and aggressive, sexually abusive Muslim men (121). This form of gender relations was seen as part of the uncivilised culture of the inhabitants of the mountains (121).
from cultural and religious subjugation was adopted as a justification of the Russian imperial project (121). Such ideology is expressed on more than one occasion in Tolstoy’s novella. He disparages both Shamil and Hadji Murat as reflecting rigid and unrefined views of women. His criticism appears to stem from his Orientalist perspective of the Caucasian traditions, both Islamic and cultural.

In his diary, Tolstoy documents his idea of the style of narrative: “There is an English toy called a ‘peepshow’ – first one thing and then another is shown underneath a glass. That’s the way to show Hadji Murat: as a husband, a fanatic, etc.” (Tolstoy’s Diaries 457). Despite the fact that Tolstoy adhered to this style in alternating the narration of events and introductions of characters, the two faces of Hadji Murat he mentions in this brief note, the “husband” and “the fanatic,” do not alternate but mingle. For example, Tolstoy puts the following words on Hadji Murat’s tongue: “The khansha [mother of khan] was a weak woman, foolish and bold, as all women are when they live by their own will. . . a woman has as much sense in her head as there are hairs on an egg” (50-1).

Articulating such views through Hadji Murat contributes to the homogenous assumption regarding Caucasian gender relations as oppressive to women. In this quotation, Hadji Murat’s misogynist viewpoint is situated within the political struggle between the two imams; his criticism of the khansha is based on her shortcomings in the face of Shamil and his allies.

In a similar manner, Tolstoy writes that Shamil’s wives stand behind a fence, which segregates the women’s quarter from the men’s, watching him as he arrives from a battle (87). This extreme segregation is seen as a form of marginalising women and barring them from their right to socialisation. Russian women, on the other hand, are permitted the pleasures of dinner parties, balls and visits to theatres. Caucasian women’s deprivation is emphasised by the rigid manners of their male counterparts. Tolstoy tells a story of a dispute in Shamil’s household. Upon his arrival after a battle, Shamil provides Zeidat with a piece of silk but neglects Ameena, his younger wife (89). He narrates that Ameena punishes Shamil by locking him out of her room during the night, leaving him waiting outside her door (89).

Historical writing is essentially selective of what side of the story can be highlighted. As a contemporary of Shamil and Hadji Murat, Tolstoy’s narrative does not represent a struggle against temporal barriers, as the historical writing of Aboulela does. Rather, Tolstoy’s depiction is subjected to his position within imperial Russia and its Caucasian enemies. In a fashion similar to that of his co-citizens, Tolstoy blames this struggle on Shamil. Aboulela’s depiction of the conflict between the two Caucasian leaders
tells the story differently. She explicates the manner in which such events stir profound ideological bias. In The Kindness, Aboulela states that Russian military officers claim a complete knowledge of the conflict to promote their own narratives. In such narratives, Hadji Murat receives Russian sympathy for his anti-Shamil struggle. At a dinner party, Jamaledin is provoked into explaining the reasons behind the conflict between his father and Hadji Murat after hearing a sympathetic testimonial account of the latter’s character and death told by a Russian general (197). Jamaledin says, “After failing in a mission, Hadji Murat was removed from office by my father, who also publicly forgave him. Instead of accepting this decree, however, Hadji Murat defected. This show of ingratitude brought down on him the charge of apostasy” (197). Jamaledin’s account paves the way for a conversation between those sympathetic with either Shamil or Hadji Murat. The same general sees this as “[a]n unfair charge” whereas Prince David, who is Princess Anna’s husband, concludes that Hadji Murat could be “an opportunist who shifted his alliances when necessary” (197).

Jamaledin’s account is dismissed by the Russians mainly because it defends their enemy Shamil, who is Jamaledin’s father. Aboulela highlights this conversation as conforming to the Orientalist attitude, as Edward Said’s Orientalism has already established, of assuming an ultimate knowledge of the colonised: “He was able to give them extra information, the view from Shamil’s side, but they prefer their own speculations and opinions. They knew best” (197). The depiction of Hadji Murat as a Muslim leader oppressed by his own superior and compelled to seek justice by returning to the Russians is more suitable for the Russian military’s sense of achievement. Jamaledin’s story is rejected as unworthy and perhaps even as lacking credibility because he is defending his father against the previous ally of Russia.

In its attempt to shed light on the unnarrated history, Aboulela’s narrative tackles two sides of Shamil’s power that were misrepresented in Orientalist writings, namely his patriarchal perspective of gender relations and his application of extreme Shari’ a law. These are frequently highlighted by Orientalist writings to depict him as a brutal leader whose people were in dire need of Russian salvation. Aboulela writes the story of the dispute in Shamil’s household differently to urge a sceptical view of incidents such as those narrated by Tolstoy and other Orientalist writers. This motivates her narratives of two incidents that tell the other side of the quarrel. In Aboulela’s version, Ameena wants a piece of silk that Zeidat has, and the quarrel escalates when Ameena burns Zeidat’s room (151). On another occasion, Ameena walks to Anna’s room and playfully hides from Shamil, who is about to arrive to spend the night with her (184). Shamil’s habit, as the
narrative highlights, is to knock at his wives’ doors and wait for their permission to enter their rooms (184). He knocks at Ameena’s door and waits patiently for a while; receiving no welcome, he locks the door and takes the key with him (185).

Aboulela’s intention to defend Shamil can be understood in the following way: On the first occasion, Aboulela does not mention whether or not the silk was a gift from Shamil. Because polygamy is conditioned on just treatment, Shamil’s failure to provide equal material and spiritual support to his wives is religiously abhorred.\(^\text{22}\) Shamil could not punish Ameena for burning Zeidat’s room (151) because he was entrusted with satisfying her material needs. On the second occasion, Aboulela makes explicit that Shamil’s relation to his wives is marked by an egalitarian relationship; therefore, Ameena’s action is based on merriment rather than anger. In her depiction of such incidents, she emphasises the limits of Shamil’s authority in relation to domestic and legal issues, an authority depicted by Tolstoy as ultimate.

Aboulela’s historical writing of gender espouses an uncritical perspective on the social and ideological order of the time. Her representation of the two incidents fits within her overall paradigm of women’s agency, which positions collective agency in a superior position to individual agency. Therefore, perceiving the social paradigm and its conceptualisation of the individual’s contribution to collective moral virtues may assist in understanding Aboulela’s representation of women’s agency in Shamil’s Caucasus. Furthermore, highlighting such a moral hierarchy can aid Aboulela’s representation of Shamil’s legal viewpoint. As explained in chapter 1, this form of collective agency is emphasised in the Shari’a’s imposition of penalties.\(^\text{23}\) Punishments are justified by their influence on the prevalence of morality and the eschatological purity of the punished. Shamil’s subjection of individual agency to that of the collective through his application of severe punishments falls within this paradigm. To some extent, giving priority to the public welfare could be the result of the continuous and extended anti-colonial war that helped formulate the social structure. Aboulela rarely questions Shamil’s concern with emphasising the ultimate power of the Shari’a, which leads him, at times, to assume a personal right to decide the fate of the convicted: “When a prisoner faced his death sentence without flinching, Shamil spared him and gave him his due praise. But those who wept and fought were deprived of his mercy. Was he truly just?” (63). This example emphasises the political nature of his relationship to the Shari’a. Within the military

\(^{22}\) A Qur’anic verse states this: “you may marry other women who seem good to you: two, three, or four. But if you fear that you cannot maintain equality among them, marry one only” (4:3).

\(^{23}\) The argument is in Asad’s Formations (91).
situation of the Caucasian frontiers, he must assert that the individual’s actions have to conform to the needs of social welfare to prevent deficiency when confronting the enemy.

Aboulela emphasises that Shamil is not exempt from such hierarchy. As she describes, Shamil’s surrender of his son to the Russians is based on his logic that “the community [is] privileged over the individual” (161). This conviction gives Shamil’s naibs the right to urge Shamil to surrender his son in order to initiate peace negotiations (22). Sixteen years later, Shamil must submit again to the rule of the community during the negotiations to release Jamaleldin. The naibs and Zeidat request 40,000 roubles in ransom, which complicates and extends the negotiations (161). Aboulela highlights Shamil’s suffering due to this rule to prove that his reign is anything but authoritarian. His authority has to be measured against the welfare of the people. For Aboulela, providing the naibs with the right to negotiate and even slow down the exchange of hostages indicates that power is in the hands of the group: It is a collective power. This power, along with the politiced Shari’a, has its impact on the kind of life individuals lead and, of course, on their agency.

Women’s agency is not an exception to this ideology. In Aboulela’s depiction of women’s situation in the Caucasus, the narrative focuses on describing the conditions of Shamil’s wives and Princess Anna, who is treated as “a guest” in Shamil’s household (159). Generally, women of Shamil’s society are confined and required to wear burkas (full veils covering their faces), and polygamy is the norm (150). Such procedures are seen as a way of establishing collective morality. Anna, the kidnapped Georgian princess, finds women’s lives intolerable: “What do they do with themselves, Shamil’s women? Anna’s hosts were themselves like prisoners huddled in these quarters” (149). Anna’s amazement at the women’s situation stems from her own experience as a hostage in this household. She suffers greatly during her life in the Caucasus in spite of Shamil’s and Chuanat’s attempts to ease her pain. She finds the Caucasian lifestyle intolerable. Confronting Shamil with her anger, she rails that they have “no fresh air, no sunlight, no exercise” (149). However, as the novel illustrates, Anna soon realises that Shamil’s wives are living in the same conditions (149). Anna asks Chuanat about her life with Shamil: “But it is so basic, this life. How can you bear it? No music, no rides, no books. These stone rooms. The food is horrible, the clothes are horrible” (151). To this, Chuanat nods and replies, “Yes, I wish Shamil would permit us to dress better. A bonnet and a cloak – I would like that. But not the other things, not at all. It would have been basic too in the convent” (151). The situation of Shamil’s wives mostly is explored in Anna’s reflections or via her
conversation with them. The oddness and austerity of their lives are, therefore, expressed in Russian measures.

Chuanat’s spirituality takes special importance in Aboulela’s novel. She is represented as having a closer bond to Shamil than his other wives (150-1, 300), whereas Tolstoy asserts that Ameena is the most adored (86). Chuanat in Aboulela’s account remains Christian but receives spiritual support from Shamil, although historical accounts report that she voluntarily converted to Islam (Jersild 114). In Aboulela’s account, Christian spirituality connotes significant messages. Her spirituality is highlighted as infusing her relationship with Shamil with satisfaction. She approves of Anna’s impression of the rigidity of their lives and confirms that she can find consolation only in her spirituality. In referring to Chuanat’s former ambition to be a nun in the Armenian Church, Aboulela seems to support her view of women’s agency by referring to women’s situation in the Christian monastery. Chuanat’s story clearly indicates that her marriage to Shamil is a hierarchically constructed one: “there is such a blessing in being with him, in serving him” (151). However, Aboulela represents this hierarchy as purely spiritual; Chuanat sees him as akin to a saint whose spirituality elevates hers. Aboulela’s view of supportive patriarchy is exemplified in this marital relation in which gender equality is not questioned but is compensated by spiritual satisfaction and appreciation.

Representing an Armenian Christian, who was previously a prisoner of war, as a supporter of a war against Christian Orthodox Russia is an attempt to diversify the Sufi message of Shamil and his military resistance to the colonial onslaught. Chuanat’s Christianity and Shamil’s support of her spirituality (150) emphasise that Shamil’s war is a spiritually motivated and tolerant one. Above all, as Jersild indicates, the fact that Chuanat was a prisoner of war who became Shamil’s wife qualifies her to be at the centre of Orientalist writers’ attention (114). Therefore, in Aboulela’s novel, she is made articulate, and her views of gender relations are carefully highlighted. The involvement of women in the war was condemned by each side as a degradation of the moral standards of the other. It is useful to return briefly to Tolstoy’s narrative of women’s position in the struggle in order to establish a good understanding of this issue. Tolstoy tells the story of Hadji Murat’s kidnapping of his enemy’s widow. In Tolstoy’s account, Hadji Murat and Ahmet Khan are fierce enemies (42), and Hadji Murat kidnaps Ahmet Khan’s widow after his death. A Georgian prince tells his Russian military colleagues of Hadji Murat’s wish to take “revenge” on his enemy (42). Tolstoy describes this prince as “very stupid, but a remarkably subtle and skilful flatterer and courtier” (42). The Georgian prince is motivated to speak of Hadji Murat to please his senior, Prince Vorontsov, by elevating the importance...
of the newly received fugitive (42). The defence of Hadji Murat, remarkably similar to that written by Aboulela for Shamil, is given by Prince Vorontsov: “I was told that he treated his prisoner with chivalrous respect and then released her” (43). At the time, women were certainly a means of inflicting harm on the enemy. The story itself was not tolerated by the Russian nobles or by Tolstoy as a negative characterisation of their ally.

In The Kindness, Anna, Madame Drancy and Chuanat are all taken as hostages or prisoners of war. Aboulela attempts to contest Orientalist narratives related to the capture of the three. Anna raises a question that echoes the Russian narratives: “Is it true that you ransomed yourself to Shamil to save your family?” (149). Chuanat replies, “That’s what I wanted them to believe but, no, I fell in love with him. I could not leave him” (150). Aboulela sees Chuanat’s affection for Shamil as the actual reason for her marriage to him, and her spirituality enables her to tolerate the hard life he leads. By making Chuanat initiate her confession of the romance with “That’s what I wanted them to believe,” Aboulela asserts the hardship of attempting a realistic and accurate historiography of such incidents. The story of victimisation, as depicted in Orientalist writings, could instead be one of love and sacrifice. This indication of layers of thoughts and feelings that remain untold in the historical writings complicates the objective and rational frameworks of historiography and confirms that no historical writing is a complete one. As the discussion continues to reveal, objective historiography is unattainable.

Anna and Madame Drancy, in contrast to Chuanat, suffer during their period of kidnapping. Their temporary experience of mountain life leads to the deterioration of their health (149). This suffering is highlighted as resulting from the great difference between their cultures and lifestyles. When abhorred by his Sufi teacher, Jamal el-Din, for the kidnapping, Shamil confirms that he supervises the hostages’ affairs himself and that “if Her Highness continues to suffer it is not [his] fault but that of the pampered lifestyle she has been accustomed to” (159). Shamil’s blame for the abduction is justified both by his desire to release his son Jamaleldin and by his endeavour to provide the best possible circumstances for the hostages.

Although Tolstoy and Aboulela pay attention to the kidnapping of women, such stories are narrated within a political context that makes the proponents and opponents of each side produce different versions of the stories in striving for a defence. This may lead to marginalising the suffering of abducted women. The abstraction of women’s

24 It is necessary here to state that the number of hostages taken in the Caucasian raid of the Georgian state of Tsinondali is around twenty-three women and children. The decision to write about three hostages was made by Aboulela purely for literary reasons (Aboulela, The Short Story Festival)
victimisation by conflicting political parties as a tool of condemnation for the other side is an Orientalist strategy that is utilised to legitimise colonial attacks. Furthermore, it leads to the neglect of the victimisation of average women, whose stories may not represent a valuable and valid narrative to demonise the enemy.

As Aboulela’s novel confirms, Anna’s kidnapping stirs a critical movement against Shamil across the West. It is because of this kidnapping that the British ambassador in Turkey declared the end of the British support of Shamil: “Shamil is a fanatic and a barbarian with whom it would be difficult for us… to entertain any credible or satisfactory relations” (213). After the return of Anna, Aboulela depicts her as defending Shamil and his people by denying some widespread stories (267). The suffering of the hostages, as the novel explains, is utilised to confirm Orientalist assumptions about the Chechens. Anna is misquoted in the German press as saying that “[t]he highlanders are not human beings, they are wild beasts” (267), a statement which Anna denies completely (267).

Aboulela derives this incident from E. A. Verderevskii’s Captivity of Two Russian Princesses in the Caucasus, which she has lauded for its honest corrections of such mistaken accounts of the Chechens (The Kindness 267). This book, however, was criticised by Jersild for its Orientalist account of the kidnapping and of Shamil’s personality (112). Jersild’s critique can be justified by the many instances in which Verderevskii expresses typical Orientalist views of the Caucasians. On one occasion, Verderevskii confirms that the Caucasians “treat their women so much like slaves” (78). Furthermore, he recounts that “[a]ltogether there was a great deal of heroism displayed by the Christian captives, and a considerable amount of barbarity by their Mussulman conductors” (91). Aboulela cites this book in her bibliography, and some of its factual content made its way into her novel. In an interview, she explained that this book is important because it was written during Shamil’s lifetime (Aboulela, Edinburgh International Book Festival 2015). However, the use of such Orientalist resources affected Aboulela’s novel, marking it with partiality.

The use of the Orientalist historical materials that pay abundant attention to Shamil and his family as an object of fascination resulted in Aboulela’s concentration on the same group in order to construct a defence. In her representation of women’s involvement in the war, Aboulela may have neglected the average woman’s situation under the reign of Shamil. For instance, Muslim women’s suffering under the threat of abduction is hardly mentioned and remains in the background of Aboulela’s narrative. Before Akhulgo falls to the Russians, Shamil escapes with his family, leaving his naibs and their families to fight to the end (30-1). Zeidat tells Anna the story of the women who were left behind: “they could not escape and so they knew the Russians were going to capture them . . . They
covered their faces with their veils and jumped from the cliffs. . . Because being captured by the Russians is worse for a woman than death” (147). The dishonour that may befall a woman’s family if she is taken prisoner by the Russians motivated many Caucasian women to take their own lives. Unfortunately, the narration of this story is minimal. This depiction deprives the victims, or heroines, of the reader’s empathy as the women are denied the individuality of their personal perspectives and experiences. Being left with little acknowledgement makes their actual motivation for seeking death ambiguous, leaving the reader to question whether the act arises from an ambition for martyrdom or a fear of social dishonour. This, in turn, raises questions regarding these women’s access to Shari’a law and whether they were capable of identifying social misogyny and recognising its difference from religiously required qiwamah.

The little attention paid to the situation of common women marks Aboulela’s writing with elitism. Depicting anti-colonial war in such a way contradicts Aboulela’s original notion of the abhorrence of Orientalist stereotyping of Muslim societies. As discussed in the introduction, Orientalist anthropology depends on normative classifications of Muslim societies as scriptural urban versus traditional rural, which has led to a dichotomy between Islamic ideologies. Aboulela’s The Kindness does not contribute adequately to bridging the gap between the historiographical representations of the two divisions of Shamil’s society. Not addressing the religious and political situation of common Muslim women in this anti-colonial war leaves their history vulnerable to Orientalist writings, which present them as oppressed both by Shari’a laws and by Muslim men.

Taking a defensive position in her treatment of gender relations and women’s agency, motivated by her desire to defend Shamil against the Orientalist depiction, reduces Aboulela’s historical narrative to a reactionary account, in which selected parts of the story can be highlighted. Much of the narrative is dedicated to defending Shamil against Western accusations of barbarity and ruthlessness. These come either directly by placing the roles of defence on Drancy’s or Anna’s tongues, or indirectly by explaining Shamil’s position from a certain situation, such as his aforementioned reaction to Ameena. This approach negatively affects Aboulela’s story, marking it with an elitist examination of social structure and using an apologetic tone. Aboulela does not offer a critical consideration of women’s situation in Shamil’s household. For example, Aboulela fails to question justice in relation to Shamil’s decision to marry the young Ameena, who was his children’s peer (119). In fact, Ameena offers the only justification of the marriage: “It was my beauty that ended my childhood. Imam Shamil could hardly pretend that he couldn’t notice me” (119).
This reveals her childish and deluded nature. Instead, Aboulela highlights Ameena’s divorce as evidence of Shamil’s justice: Ameena requests divorce because she would like to marry a man who is her own age, and Shamil accepts (191). Aboulela does not question Ameena’s will or her ability to make a decision in relation to marriage; she depicts divorce positively as a reflection of an egalitarian relationship.

Aboulela’s position can be justified, as explained previously in chapter 1, as stemming from a desire to depict past gender relations without applying modern patterns of investigation. As Hollywood argues, the study of past models of agency available to religious women should not be based on modern social sciences’ standards of women’s rights (“Gender, Agency and the Divine in Religious Historiography” 517–9). Therefore, it might be reductive to assume a patriarchal use of Shari’a because the negative conceptualisation of patriarchy was not present within the social or ideological constructions of the nineteenth-century Caucasus. In this regard, forcing an explanation of the patriarchal application of Shari’a laws in Shamil’s Sufism could be as assumptive and simplistic as Orientalist anthropologies.

Conversely, finding a justification for Aboulela’s elitist engagement with past gender relations might be difficult, particularly when these relations lead to minimal representation of the situation of common women. A rare glimpse of these women is offered when Madame Drancy tells Anna that she saw a widow with her baby in a pit that was used to imprison criminals (188). The woman was jailed there for murdering the man who killed her husband (188). She was sentenced to four months in jail, which is also the period of her idda, the Shari’a-legislated confinement for widows, after which she would be forced to marry again (188). Although this incident has deep significance for a comprehensive understanding of women’s agency, Aboulela does not provide further context. In fact, the story is dismissed as no more than an Orientalist account made by Madame Drancy, who is an example of an Orientalist intellectual. She tells this story when Anna asks her about her prospectus book, in which she wants to write about the story of their captivity (188). After recalling this incident, Madame Drancy says, “I have never been in such close proximity to a people so different from me. It is a marvel” (188). This statement emphasises Madame Drancy’s distance from Caucasian society and her Orientalist interest in and amazement at witnessing such exotic situations. Hence, Aboulela’s writing of this incident does not permit it to be considered critically. For example, she does not question whether this punishment was tailored to accommodate this individual woman’s circumstances as a widow and a mother. Aboulela does not clarify whether marriage was considered a form of discipline. These assumptions will remain
unconfirmed because Aboulela’s historiography does not offer adequate knowledge to contextualise common women’s agency with regard to Shamil’s application of Shari’a.

As previously argued, a lack of religious historiography of colonial and postcolonial societies that is independent from Orientalist intellectual heritage complicates individuals’ attempts to identify contemporary models of religious agency. Thus, due to the ensuing disparity between Islamic schools, Muslim women’s agency is affected. In particular, the struggle between contemporary Salafism and Sufism makes religious agency hard to attain. The following analysis of the present-day section of The Kindness and Minaret discusses the hardships that face contemporary Muslim women who seek to achieve religious agency.

3. Guilt and Spirituality in Minaret and The Kindness of Enemies:

In Minaret (2005), Najwa is a Sudanese girl who grew up in a wealthy and powerful family in Khartoum in the latter part of the twentieth century. Her father came from a humble family and rose to be the second most important man in the country because of his marriage to a wealthy woman (8). Najwa’s mother is a refined and charitable woman. Omar, her twin brother, is a westernised man who approves of the British colonisation of Sudan (Aboulela, Minaret 12). Surrounded by luxury and admirers, Najwa becomes an arrogant, go-with-the-flow, lethargic girl with trivial material interests. Despite this, however, she is occasionally visited by a vague sense of jealousy and guilt when encountering the religious poor and commoners (14, 32, and 44). Najwa and her family have very little interest in religion, but they observe Ramadhan (232). At the University of Khartoum, she becomes acquainted with Anwar Al-Sir, a fellow student and secular communist with whom Najwa shares a mutual attraction. However, their relationship is continually troubled, although not completely terminated, by the political ideology that makes Anwar never cease to condemn Najwa’s father’s political behaviour.

An abrupt coup takes Najwa’s family by surprise, leading to her father’s arrest and the family’s emigration to London (54). Life for her family soon takes a dramatic turn with the execution of her father (61). Najwa’s mother has leukaemia, and her health deteriorates until she dies in a London hospital (124). Omar, Najwa’s brother, is sentenced to fifteen years in prison for drug abuse. Najwa meets Anwar once more when he comes to London to study for his PhD degree (149). London gives them the freedom to enjoy an illicit relationship (173). He persuades Najwa to lend him the rest of her inheritance, but he never returns it (235). However, Najwa’s most profound wounds come from their sexual relations and Anwar’s refusal to marry her (254). Her tumultuous life prompts her to seek comfort in religion. This begins with her shock at the lack of importance of Ramadhan in
Anwar’s life (230). Najwa strives to fast and joins a multi-ethnic community group at a mosque. The group provides her with the strength to rebuild her rapidly deteriorating life (234-9). Najwa works for many people until she finds a babysitting job for little Mai (65). Mai lives with her mother Lamya, a westernised PhD student, her kind-hearted grandmother Doctora Zeinab and her teenage uncle Tamer. Najwa enjoys the comfort and simplicity of the family’s life (83). However, matters become complicated when Tamer falls in love with Najwa, who is now in her forties (256). This angers his family and puts an end to her job. The novel ends with Tamer and his mother returning to Cairo and Najwa making plans to perform Hajj. She has been given a large amount of money by Doctora Zeinab, who wanted to bribe Najwa away from Tamer (262, 267).

Broadly speaking, Najwa’s struggle for agency is a typically postcolonial one. When her economic and social position is undermined by a postcolonial coup, she becomes a migrant. The coup that topples her father’s regime leads to the installation of a Marxist government, which is subsequently overthrown in its own right. The toppling of the Marxist government leads to Anwar’s migration, after which he comes into contact with Najwa in London. Najwa and Anwar are examples of the diasporic subjects from postcolonial space who are forced to migrate to London because of the failure of postcolonial states. The intersection of the lives of the two migrants proves to be a difficult test of Najwa’s convictions. In particular, the relationship causes Najwa to question the cultural-based moral ideology she acquired while growing up in Sudan. Recalling her relationship with her father, she says:

“I don’t think I spoke to him much. I know he didn’t think a lot about me, not because he didn’t love me but because I was a girl and Mama’s responsibility. He had detailed, specific plans for Omar’s future, while I was going to get married to someone who would determine how the rest of my life flowed. (78)

Although Aboulela’s feminism does not involve gender equality, the lack of equality between Omar and Najwa still proves less than ideal within the novel, as it leads to gendered standards of morality: “Omar was allowed to smoke and drink beer and I was not. The seedy parties he went to without taking me. I had taken these things for granted, not questioned them” (175). Najwa’s cultural subordination influences her moral perspective. As Aboulela makes clear, Najwa’s moral refinement can come about only when she separates herself from her culture’s gendered moral system and accepts a religious system of morality.

In her novels, Aboulela shows suffering from guilt to be the motivation that leads her characters to embark upon a spiritual quest. As the discussion of Natasha’s agency in
The Kindness will make clear, premarital sex is represented in Aboulela’s fiction as both a religious sin and a social taboo. Living in the United Kingdom, both Najwa and Natasha are liberated from social restrictions. Natasha, a secular academic, acknowledges her guilt for having an abortion and struggles to achieve religious agency despite her secular convictions. In contrast, Najwa struggles as a result of her culturally inherited sense of morality. As she reflects when meeting Anwar, “We were free. I could not yet get over that. Freedom enthralled me when I was with [Anwar] and when I was alone. Like an experiment, it made me hold my breath and wait” (165-6). Being alone in London after the death of her mother and her brother’s imprisonment provides Najwa with a sense of sudden, unlimited freedom. While her immigration to London liberates her from social taboos, it also confuses her sense of morality, originally shaped by fear of those taboos.

Relying on his outspokenness, Anwar takes financial and sexual advantage of Najwa. He first persuades her that she has been “brainwashed about the importance of virginity” (175) and then reaps the benefits of her wealth, which he previously condemned as stemming from her father’s “corrupt” political career (44, 268). Through her characterisation of Najwa and Anwar’s relationship, Aboulela suggests that secular political and social activists in postcolonial nation-states tend to put pressure on Muslim women’s religious agency. Anwar’s manipulation of Najwa, for instance, is as much tied to his secular ideology as it is to his opportunistic character.

As a result, Najwa’s religious agency becomes linked to her successful determination to desert Anwar. The turning point in their relationship comes when she realises that she failed to fast during her first Ramadhan in London. Because Ramadhan is the only ritual she observed with her family in Sudan (231), she leaves Anwar and strives to fast (234-5). This new spiritual endeavour enables her to begin to understand and acknowledge her painful sense of guilt, which she finds “vague and complicated” (233). Although Anwar attempts to assure her that her guilt is only temporary, the opposite proves true (175). Allegorically describing guilt and forgiveness, Aboulela puts the following words on Najwa’s tongue: “The mercy of Allah is an ocean. 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 the ocean. It only has to open its beak” (4 [emphasis in original]). Najwa’s recognition of this articulation of guilt and forgiveness, which she recalls from a talk she attended in the mosque, confirms that Najwa has overcome the burden of her guilt. Her description of the vastness of God’s forgiveness in comparison to the triviality of a human being’s sins marks the relief of her pain. The pain of regret is abolished by perceiving guilt within this context of the human and the merciful Divine. This direct
spiritual relationship involves the disassociation of her guilt from cultural taboos and social conventions. This, however, does not mean that Aboulela endorses an individualistic view of guilt.

Understanding that acknowledgements of guilt have little meaning in secular society outside of secularly defined criminal actions, Najwa finds herself longing for institutionalised Islamic Shari’a law, which would accommodate her perspective on guilt and purification. Reflecting on her brother’s drug addiction, for instance, she says, “I wish that he had been punished the very first time he took drugs. Punished according to the Shari’a – one hundred lashes. I do wish it in a bitter, useless way because it would have put him off, protected him from himself” (193). Najwa’s standpoint is clear: a hundred lashes could have treated her brother’s addiction before he turned violent and was jailed for fifteen years (127). Najwa’s view implies that treating drug addiction within a religious paradigm provides hope for eschatological purification. Such a belief, however, runs contrary to secular notions of self-constitution because it relates guilt to a mystical source of purification and locates forgiveness outside the realm of the human.

As Aboulela suggests through Najwa’s situation, secular standards of agency do not permit adequate space for the articulation and acknowledgement of guilt and thus limit the possibilities for repentance. In “Moving Away from Accuracy” (2002), Aboulela makes this point even more clearly when she explains that “the secularism which the West championed and exported had, when it cancelled sin, cancelled with it forgiveness. And a life without forgiveness is a harsh and (paradoxically in a freedom-loving society) a stunted, congealed life” (206). For Aboulela, the pain caused by guilt provides an opportunity to recover spirituality. Although painful, the guilt has to be addressed rather than dismissed.

Living in a secular state, Najwa’s struggle to achieve religious agency leads her to fantasise about the past. Yet her idealised version of the past is strikingly distorted. This becomes especially clear in her relationship with Tamer. Frustrated that she cannot marry Tamer because of their difference in age and his family’s social position, Najwa says, “I wish we were living centuries ago and, instead of just working for Tamer’s family, I would be their slave” (215). Shahinaz, Najwa’s friend, rebukes her for this comment, but Najwa goes on to say, “I would like to be his family’s concubine, like something out of The Arabian Nights, with life-long security and a sense of belonging. But I must settle for freedom in this modern time” (215). Although it is easy to be critical of Najwa’s naive thoughts in this instance, they do suggest that her deep disappointment stems from the lack of a supportive patriarchy. In wanting to be Tamer’s family’s slave or concubine, Najwa
implies that only slavery will allow her an uninterrupted companionship with Tamer, a companionship that is unconditioned by marriage or age, and the hierarchy of the social position that hindered their marriage will be clearly established. Indeed, from Najwa’s standpoint, the benefits of such a companionship outweigh the restrictions of slavery. Far from endorsing slavery as an alternative to secularity, Aboulela uses Najwa’s reflections and lack of a sense of security to underscore the impact of the absence of a supportive patriarchy on Muslim women’s agency.

Emphasising that Najwa’s distorted perspective on the past should be understood as a consequence of her position in Western society (315), Wail Hassan argues that Najwa sees the past through the eyes of Orientalist or Islamophobic individuals in the West: “This absurd preference for slavery, in an idealized fantasy of the past, over a reductive notion of freedom as a modern invention, can only be explained by her situation as a veiled Muslim woman in Britain, isolated and constantly bombarded by hostile representations of her religion as oppressive” (315). To make this point, Hassan notes that even Najwa’s mention of The Arabian Nights is significant, as that title refers to the Orientalist translation of One Thousand and One Nights (315). Therefore, Najwa’s rejection of “freedom” can be attributed to her belief that it is a Western concept (316). Hassan’s argument gives a sense of the complexity of Aboulela’s notion of freedom. The irony of Najwa’s position, as represented by Aboulela, lies in the fact that the modern glorification of unconditional freedom pushes her in the direction of freedom’s opposite: slavery. In having her character speak about slavery, Aboulela thus underscores that unrestricted freedom, despite secular assertions, does not open the way to agency; rather, for religious individuals, such a notion of freedom represents the denial of agency.

Aboulela’s portrayal of Najwa and Tamer’s yearning for the past has a corollary in her last novel, The Kindness, which also focuses on a longing for an idealised past. Unlike Natasha and Malak, Najwa and Tamer fail to adapt to modernity and therefore direct their gaze backward in time. Attempting to envisage his marriage to Najwa without the obstacles of age and social position, for instance, Tamer feels compelled to “go back in time.” Najwa narrates:

“The two of us would go back in time. A time of horses and tents; swords and raids” I smile and he continues. “There wouldn’t be any ‘Business’ and I wouldn’t have to go to university.” We are both too simple for this time and place. Sometimes I want to die; not out of despair or fear but just to step away from life and stand in the shade, watch it roll on without me, changeable and aggressive.
(255)
Tamer and Najwa’s idealisation of the past is evidence of their simple-mindedness and naïveté. For them, where religion is concerned, the past, unlike the present, represents an accessible, indisputable and easy spirituality. Aboulela makes her secular characters, but not her religious characters, articulate and well-educated. Tamer’s inability to accept his parents’ wish for him to study business is due to his belief that it is a materialistic major. His decision to change his major to “Middle East Studies” is perceived by his parents as an abortion of his future career (267-71). The latter major includes many Islamic-related modules, including “Studies in the Qur’an, Islamic Architecture in Spain and North Africa, Ibn Khaldun” (271 [emphasis in original]). This major is described as accommodating Tamer’s intellectual quest to study “Islamic History” (267). The comparison between the two majors, deeming one to be materialistic and professionally promising whereas the other is intellectually and spiritually fulfilling but offers no certain future career, indicates the estrangement of spiritual subjects. For Aboulela, due to the predominance of modernity and capitalism, there is a gap between spirituality and practical life. The secular characters are capable of finding agency within secular modern standards of empowerment, whereas religious others are estranged by such standards.

This perspective permeates Aboulela’s fiction. Her characterisation of secular and religious protagonists is indicative of their ideological positions. In The Kindness, for instance, her narrator, Natasha, is a secular intellectual who seeks faith. In making Natasha’s secular ideology accessible to readers, Aboulela offers a convincing portrait of her character’s feelings of guilt. The Kindness is thus the first of Aboulela’s novels to provide full characterisation of a character with secular affinities. In contrast, secular characters such as Anwar and Lamya in Minaret are depicted as undeserving of sympathy and credit, and their secular views are underrepresented. This way of characterisation articulates the nature of the narratives. In Minaret, Najwa’s voice as she narrates the events is a spiritual one, rendering the novel an account of her spiritual struggle. The role of Anwar and Lamya is restricted to their positive or negative contribution to her spiritual devotion. The narrative of The Kindness does not have a spiritual centre embodied in one character’s struggle; it instead comprises a representation of multiple characters’ spiritual endeavours running parallel in two temporal and spatial contexts.

In both texts, spirituality is asserted as integral to religious agency. Najwa’s agentic act is depicted in the form of a Hajj journey. When her relationships prove unsuccessful and she loses her job as a babysitter for Mai, she plans to go on the Hajj with the money she has been given by Doctora Zeinab (264). For Najwa, Hajj represents the ultimate purification, the act through which she can be relieved of her sense of guilt: “I would like
to go on Hajj. If my Hajj is accepted, I will come back without any sins and start my life again, fresh” (209). As this quotation suggests, Najwa’s continuous search for forgiveness leads her to think of Hajj as a journey that provides purification and enables a new start. Her development of agency thus coincides with a deepening of her faith. In Minaret and The Kindness, purification from guilt is essential to the achievement of religious agency. As will be clarified in the following discussion of Natasha’s agency, guilt causes Aboulela’s characters to recognise the spiritual necessity of forgiveness. Both Najwa and Natasha are empowered as a result of their experiences of guilt.

The part of the novel that takes place in the present-day narrates the story of Natasha’s attempts to come to terms with her spiritual and social exile, leading her to confront her secular convictions. This discussion engages with Aboulela’s views of individualism as innate to secularism and as hindering religious women’s agency. For Aboulela, individualism and its promises of autonomy distracts women from recognising their guilt and seeking forgiveness. Spirituality, on the other hand, facilitates this recognition and enables them to achieve agency.

The epigraph to The Kindness is a quotation from Herman Hesse’s Steppenwolf (1927, 2012): “We have to grope our way through so much filth and rubbish in order to reach home! And we have no one to show us the way. Homesickness is our guide” (153 [pagination as in original]). The connotations of Hesse’s words are reflected throughout the novel. Natasha experiences an extended state of spiritual and physical displacement. Her spiritual alienation remains as a haunting homesickness, which she finds hard to recognise. As previously discussed, Natasha’s denial of faith and indulgence in the freedom offered to her by the new society does not provide her with a sense of belonging, but of guilt: “My own failed romantic attachments seemed like an apt punishment, because although I went through the motions, these casual relationships never felt right” (72). Her guilt is amplified by the abortion she secretly underwent (168). When advised by a friend to forget this incident, Natasha reflects:

But I was a Sudanese woman or at least, when I learnt the facts of life, I was preparing to be one. No matter how much I changed when I came to Britain, changed my behaviour and my thoughts, there would be layers of me, pockets, membranes and films that would carry these other values and that other guilt. (139)

As a secular character living in a secular society, Natasha’s sense of guilt for engaging in premarital sex and having an abortion is not influenced by a religious consideration, a social tradition or a collective moral interaction. However, she is aware of the discomfort
that these acts caused her conscience. Skilfully crafting the intersection between this guilt and Natasha’s social alienation, Aboulela spiritualises Natasha’s experience. The lack of certainty and belonging manifests as the spiritual aspects of Natasha’s guilt. Aboulela’s message is evident: Natasha is provided with Western modern liberty accompanied by a loose personal bond to religious and social tradition, yet this results in guilt rather than empowerment.

Aboulela is critical of the moral individualism prominent in Western societies. Benefitting from the freedom she experiences in Scotland, Natasha undergoes an abortion privately: “I had come from the hospital stunned and still bleeding but I never told them [her mother and Tony] why, just stayed in bed for a whole weekend” (168). This very situation is the subject of another short story by Aboulela, entitled “Make Your Own Way Home” (2001). The British teenage protagonist, Tracey, has to experience an abortion alone. Her mother and stepfather are having a house-swapping holiday with a family in the Black Forest (85). After the abortion, her boyfriend asks her to return home on her own (89). Tracey’s only Muslim friend, Nadia, comes to visit and accompany her home. This prompts a comparison of the social lives of the two protagonists. Nadia’s relationship to the other sex is limited to smiles and gestures of admiration (90). Nadia, whose parents are originally from Egypt, views the premarital sexual relationship as an unforgivable offence and a traumatic experience that involves the whole community. For Tracey, the downside to the sexual relationship is associated with the pregnancy, because being a teenage mother is associated with lack of education, lack of a suitable profession and poverty. Expectedly, Aboulela gently drives the comparison towards favouring Nadia’s situation: “There is something childlike about Nadia, something pampered, though she could not be described as spoilt. She has a looked-after air about her” (93). The moralising tone of the narrative in Aboulela’s short story, which she wrote early in her literary career, is softened in her recent novel, even though the undercurrent of the argument is the same. For Aboulela, the individualism that Natasha and Tracey are offered by Western standards of women’s agency is not tolerant of mistakes. For her, traditions in some Muslim societies, such as in Egypt, are unforgiving as well. Although these traditions may hinder women’s quest for agency, the Western individualistic perspective of agency, from Aboulela’s standpoint, reduces agency to well-being.

This notion is portrayed in Tracey’s loneliness at the “Nursing Home,” the blame she receives from her stepfather for her “carelessness” and by a casual incident that

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25 Aboulela’s fiction tends to stir arguments regarding whether or not they are preachy. For example, Wail Hassan argues that “Aboulela’s fiction indeed preaches to the converted by depicting models of community and individual behaviour that sustain the faithful” (191). Hassan’s argument refers specifically to the popularity of Aboulela’s narratives among young devout individuals living in the West.
occurred on Tracey and Nadia’s way home, when a stranger trod on Tracey’s foot and struck her knees with his briefcase, leaving her tearful (94). The selfish reactions of Tracey’s mother, stepfather and boyfriend are depicted by Aboulela to assert that individualism and the secular perspective of agency that implies that individuals have full responsibility over their bodies lead to suffering going unshared. Aboulela blames secularism for the pain caused by such experiences.

Continuing with this topic, Aboulela describes religious agency as involving a profound interconnection between the physical and spiritual on one hand and the individual and collective on the other. Natasha’s spiritual and cultural alienation parallels her physical journeying. She is forced into a nomadic life from the beginning of the novel, when her visit to Malak and Oz is extended by the snowfall (6). This is followed by a sequence of events, such as the raid of her flat by police and her travel to Sudan (102, 279), all of which leave her displaced. Soon after returning to Scotland and to her flat, she is invited by Malak to visit Dunnottar Castle and witnesses Malak’s Sufi journeys throughout the United Kingdom (311). Malak invites Natasha to accompany her for her next destination, Orkney, and Natasha accepts (314). Natasha reflects: “My homesickness wasn’t cured but it was, I was sure, propelling me in the right direction” (314). Natasha’s journey to Sudan and her reclaiming of her father’s intellectual inheritance of Russian books, including Leo Tolstoy’s Hadji Murat (1912), is represented as an essential step for Natasha to retrieve her faith.

Aboulela considers journeying to be a way of eradicating the barriers between the manner in which the spiritual and physical are sensed in the individual’s consciousness. In her article “Travel is Part of Faith” (2000), Aboulela reflects on her life in Scotland as well as on meanings of home. She writes: “One of the Sufis said, 'Travel away from home and the difficulties will be a medicine for your ego's badness, you will return softer and wiser’” (41). Travelling, for Aboulela, is beneficial for spirituality in terms of the experience of unfamiliar places and the difficulties caused by this experience (42). This, Aboulela explains, represents a slight manifestation of the transformations of worldly life that will be initiated by the Day of Judgement, in which she believes as a devout Muslim (42). The Day of Judgement eliminates the boundaries of the physical and the spiritual. Aboulela spiritualises the experience of migration in order to propose a broad notion of what qualifies a place as a home. Aboulela engages spatial and cultural elements, in which home is decisive to the formation of an individual’s perspective of life, friends and “enemies” (42). “Home,” like “enemies,” is not a fixed term. This Sufi journeying invokes openness, compassion and tolerance, which influence the understanding of the self and other. In The Kindness, travelling is made essential for Natasha to come to terms with her idea of home.
Her spiritual and cultural exiles are depicted through the novel as latent, and they are made explicit to Natasha through the travels she undertakes.

Sufi journeying and the dynamic view of migration Aboulela depicts in her article and novel are similar to that of Nacer Khemir. In Khemir’s *Bab’Aziz* (2005), as the fourth chapter will discuss in detail, the characters journey towards a Sufi gathering that takes place every thirty years. The exact time and place of the gathering are never identified; therefore, the travellers have to follow their inner insights. Khemir’s idea of Sufi journeying is based on the spiritual bond to the space, which takes significance from his belief in waḥdat al-wujūd. In *Bab’Aziz*, the desert is depicted as a Sufi cosmopolitan space, in which there is no identification of an accurate path towards God. The film opens with a statement: “There are as many paths to God as there are souls on Earth” (*Bab’Aziz*). For Khemir, the openness of the desert is a reflection of borderless Sufism. Khemir channels his Sufi cosmopolitan perspective through the journeying of the dervishes, which eliminates conventional boundaries of self and identity. In such a space, the sense of completed journey and arrival is delayed to allow spiritual devotion to develop. Perpetual home is only shown when the main character of the film, the dervish Bab’Aziz, dies, thus experiencing the long-pursued unification with the Divine.

Spiritual ecology in *Bab’Aziz* represents the universe as sacred. Unlike Ibrahim Al-Koni’s novel, The Bleeding of the Stone, for Khemir spiritualising the bond to the land does not necessitate the presence of a materialistic outsider. In Al-Koni’s novel, Cain’s greed for meat challenges Asouf’s relationship with the waddan and with his own values because he took an oath to never kill a waddan (32-3). Al-Koni’s novel represents an example of the postcolonial spiritual ecology that seeks, as chapter 4 will discuss, to deconstruct modern assumptions of self-constitution and mastery over the universe.

Aboulela’s spiritual ecology in “Days Rotate” represents a postcolonial paradigm in the sense of an anticipation of an apocalypse to end neo-colonisation and Western materialistic civilisations. In *The Kindness*, Aboulela’s Sufism seems to be proceeding towards an adoption of a universal spirituality. In this novel, Aboulela may have opted to complicate, rather than emphasise, the postcolonial ecological perspective that views the individual as a product and an extension of homeland. Aboulela’s spiritual ecology therefore did not sacralise home or belonging; rather, her depiction of the spirituality of the place in *The Kindness* stress moral and historical dimensions of the spiritual struggle.

Being exiled endlessly in the United Kingdom, Malak seeks spirituality by visiting spiritual places. Visiting these places is represented as revealing a context of religious history. Malak’s spiritual retreat to Dunnottar castle is saturated with historical and spiritual meaning. A glimpse of the history of the castle is explained by Natasha and
Malak: Malak says, “Centuries ago, people in this very spot worshipped as you were worshipping just now. They believed like you believed.” Natasha thinks, “And centuries ago, as Covenant history teaches, they also waged wars, resisted, and rebelled around issues of faith” (312-3). The castle was a centre of religious struggle in Scotland. Religious struggles were terminated by the advent of the secular state; therefore, the association of spirituality with civilizational advancement and national unity has been terminated. However, whereas the Christian Western struggle determined the Western present by producing political ideologies related to Protestantism, the Sufism of Shamil did not. The present of Sufism is decided by colonial military and ideological powers.

Malak pursues the spirituality that saturates the atmosphere of the place, or what she calls “a powerful presence” (312). Throughout her spiritual tour, she visits many places, some of which are “artificial and depressing,” and she can only persist in her journeys by recalling that she could be the first human being to mention the name of God in such a place (313). Aboulela, like Khemir, views the notion of the universality of Islam as conforming to Sufi ideas of the universe, rather than terrorism. Malak’s reading of the Qur’an in this historically Christian castle is justified by her intention: “I do not want anyone to hear me. The trees, the wind, the angels. That is enough for me” (313). This perspective of the universal notion of religion is informed by Sufi ecological ideas, derived from Ibn ‘Arabi’s notion of waḥdat al-wujūd, that animals and objects are animate and perceptive. It refers to Aboulela’s mystical ideology of “Days Rotate,” which gives animals a spiritual power over corrupt human beings: “I was being cursed by the grass, the thorns, the snails I hadn’t killed” (135). Aboulela’s depiction of humans’ position in the universe as vulnerable to spiritual hierarchy emphasises her perspective of collective moral responsibility: individualistic moral standards are not within the reach of human beings.

Aboulela’s coupling of a historically mindful view of complex ideological and political relations with place and ecology assists in understanding the agentic space available to postcolonial subjects. This journeying provides a refuge for Malak’s and Natasha’s agency. Towards the end of her travel to Sudan, Natasha has to rethink her loyalty to Islam when accused of apostasy by her stepmother Safia (279). In the court, Natasha is asked questions concerning her faith, her old name and whether or not she was ever married to a non-Muslim (289). Nonetheless, Natasha does not declare her loyalty to Islam in the court. The delay of Natasha’s return to faith is shown by Aboulela to preserve the narrative from being dogmatic. In the face of such authoritarian imposition of faith as exhibited in the trial, Aboulela weaves the social traditional aspects of religion with faith, allowing Natasha a narrow escape. Natasha challenges this accusation to reclaim a place in her birth religion and society: “I did not come here today to fight over money or for the
share of a house. I came so that I would not be an outcast, so that I would, even in a small way, faintly, marginally, tentatively, belong” (290). Aboulela does not represent faith as a birth right; she employs the interconnection of social taboos with religious ones. Perceiving apostasy as a social taboo that threatens her belonging, Natasha defends herself. Therefore, her defence is diplomatic rather than redemptive: “I said I was not a good Muslim, but I was not a bad person either” (290). Being in a Muslim country, Natasha feels motivated to defend her position as a Muslim, even if only in name, so that she does not become “an outcast” (290). Conforming to collective moral judgement in Sudan, which is connected to social traditions, is crucial for her sense of belonging. Natasha, the sceptical voice that enriches the narrative with subtle questioning of Sufism, maintains her position on this occasion.

Giving faith the final word, the spiritually infused words of Malak convince Natasha to learn and experience Sufism (314). Just like Najwa’s redemption in Minaret, Natasha embarks on a Sufi journeying ritual with Malak (314). Natasha’s guilt, which provoked her to seek Sufism, is religiously acknowledged in Sufi terms, thus making repentance and forgiveness possible. Natasha’s confession that she had “committed a sin” (179) is received by Malak with what Natasha considers to be an inherited wisdom: “Don’t do it again… And don’t even talk about it. Let it go. Many things in life are out of our control, but our egos insist that they are leaders” (179). The submission of the ego through Sufism is a purification of Natasha’s guilt. Subverting the secular ideology of autonomy, this submission introduces a religious perspective of agency. For Aboulela, the guilt that is caused by secular individualism, which is never healed by a secular perspective, is a precursor of Sufism. Aboulela seems to approve of Asad’s ideology of pain and suffering as an agentive experience. She sees guilt and the pain that ensues as a liberation from secular static anticipation of forms of empowerment. Pain is not actively sought in the novel, as Asad’s pain is, but is used by Aboulela, through Najwa’s and Natasha’s experiences, to deconstruct secular agency.

4. Religious Agency and the Predicament of the Postcolonial in The Kindness:

Natasha’s and Malak’s search for religious agency is complicated by their situation as Muslim migrants to the West. The Kindness depicts the influence that the Chechen struggle against Russian colonisation has on the contemporary struggle of Malak. The present section of the novel centralises the issue of extremism via the representation of Oz’s vague involvement with extremist groups and his arrest for downloading terrorism-related materials. Despite the fact that Oz’s intention to use these materials for his research on “the
types of weapons used in jihad” is made clear, Malak struggles to cope with the “disappointment” of his suspicious behaviour (12 and 313, respectively). Natasha combats her shock that all of her efforts to detach herself from Islam and assert her belonging to the West have been in vain.

The novel shows that, according to the British guidelines on “students’ vulnerabilities to radicalisation,” a prominent feature in identifying individuals’ vulnerability to terrorist activities is the yearning for “an idealised past” (141 and 14, respectively). Paradoxically, all three prominent characters in the present-day section—Malak, Natasha and Oz—experience a profound longing for the past of Shamil’s anti-colonial resistance. Natasha reflects: “Here we were, the three of us, fascinated by a common past – faithful to it, even. I at least to the history, they to an ancestor they were proud of” (44). However, as they perceive this past in different ways, they long for various fragments of what unfolds as a highly complex and lengthy era of Shamil’s spiritual anti-colonial struggle. Significantly, despite the different perspectives of the three characters regarding the past, their longing falls short of attempts at retrieving models of agency or gender relations of that era. Their agencies are entangled with their historical and political situations.

Aboulela depicts the contemporary stereotype that associates Muslim individuals with terrorism. For her, this results from Orientalist history writing, which deprives the past resistance of its spiritual and mystical dimensions and portrays it as brutal aggression. This stereotype forces contemporary Muslims to carry the burden of defending their ideological or geographical belonging. In the novel, the characters are so heavily affected by this generic impression that they have to alter their Arabic names in fear of negative associations. For example, Osama is called Oz at the university and Ossie at home to avoid comparison to Osama Bin Laden (4). Natasha Hussein changes her name to Natasha Wilson to avoid comparison to deceased Iraqi president Saddam Hussein (4).

However, the novel asserts that the protagonists’ efforts are in vain. Natasha recognises that her identification as a Muslim remains evident despite her secularisms and embrace of her British identity: “Natasha Wilson denoted a person who was smeared by suspicion, tainted by crime. I might as well have stayed Natasha Hussein! . . . even though no formal charges were ever levelled at me, still, it now took conscious effort to walk with my head held high” (310). Aboulela demonstrates that religion remains a factor that could relate the two protagonists to terrorism, though in Natasha’s case, the personal denial of religion does not prevent such suspicions. Aboulela then shows that, in this context, the use of religion as an indication of suspicion may equate it with race and language. The notion
of changing names to avoid being isolated as a convict echoes—albeit to a slighter level—the effort of Jews to disguise themselves with non-Jewish names before and during the holocaust. In both cases, individuals are made accountable for an idea connected with a religion to which they are associated because of their names, regardless of their personal affiliation. Natasha reflects:

Many Muslims in Britain wished that no one knew they were Muslim. They would change their names if they could and dissolve into the mainstream, for it was not enough for them to openly condemn 9/11 and 7/7, not enough to walk against the wall, to raise a glass of champagne, to eat in the light of Ramadan and never step into a mosque or say the shahada or touch the Qur’an. All this was not enough, though many people were too polite to say it. All these actions somehow fell short of the complete irrevocable dissolution that was required. (The Kindness, 6)

Natasha’s perspective of the perpetual blame of Muslims combines intellectual contemplation and personal sensitivity caused by her struggle with her mixed racial origin, which she recognises as a struggle of two “unalloyed selves” (40). This perspective reflects the mentality that urged her to work as a reporter in her department’s surveillance programme for students vulnerable to radicalisation as a token of loyalty (141). The connection of Muslim individuals to terrorism leads Natasha to fight her vulnerability by accepting a role in this equation, the role of the identifier. During her involvement in this programme, she identifies two of her students as potential terrorists (141), revealing the manner in which terrorism being associated with Islam leaves Muslim individuals with a sense of apprehension that causes many of them to sever their relationship with the religion entirely.

Similarly, Malak’s Caucasian origin shapes her present and agentic experiences. She endures the consequences of Russia’s colonisation of the Caucasus. After Oz’s arrest, Malak’s financial support of her distant family members in Chechnya attracts the attention of the investigators, leading to her questioning for suspicion of funding terrorism (214). In the present day, Chechnya is viewed as a birth place of terrorism, a view that is associated with the historical anti-colonial struggle of the nineteenth century. This view is complicated by the Chechen-Russian war and the emergence of Chechen guerrilla fighters in the mid-1990s. This violence is recalled in events like the Boston attacks in 2013, for which the Chechen Tsarnaev brothers were responsible. Some Western journalists have referred to the nineteenth-century Caucasian struggle and Tolstoy’s Hadji Murat as
beneficial in understanding the motivations of the attackers. \(^{27}\) The return to this history and to Tolstoy’s account of it demonstrates the way Orientalist historiography continues to leave its mark on the perception of Islam and Muslim individuals. The Orientalist influence on Islamic ideologies, specifically Sufism, is perpetuated by such uncritical associations. As the discussion of Tolstoy’s novella showed, Tolstoy’s account is biased against the Chechens. Retrieving an explanation of contemporary terrorism from such sources yields reductive, stereotypical views of Muslim individuals.

The estrangement caused by Russian colonisation has a physical dimension as well. Malak bears the fruits of Shamil’s defeat and exile. After his death, his family migrated to Turkey to live in permanent exile (71). Malak reflects on the historical diaspora of the Caucasians and the struggle of the remaining people during a Soviet rule that attempts to annihilate religion (71). She asserts that her ancestors’ migration was motivated by religious reasons (71). This reminder of Caucasian migration recalls the history that is not fully narrated by the novel—that is, the history of migration and exile imposed upon the Caucasian people after Shamil’s submission to the Russians. As Jersild narrates, around 450,000 Caucasian families were forced to migrate to the Ottoman Empire within a few years of Shamil’s defeat (24-5). As a high official in the Russian army in the Caucasus reported, “In this year of 1864 [around five years after Shamil’s defeat], a deed has been accomplished almost without precedent in history” (quoted and translated by Jersild 25). In a classic imperial manner, the Caucasus was prepared for civilisation by the expulsion of its people. The military official resumed: “Not one of the mountaineers inhabitants remains on their former places of residence, and measures are being taken to cleanse the region in order to prepare it for the new Russian population” (25). Despite the conclusive tone of this official, Caucasian resistance did not end with Shamil’s defeat, and the Russian reply was always severe (Jersild 29–31).

The continuing Russian–Caucasian struggle prevented many Caucasians from returning home. As the novel depicts, this exile is perpetuated by the instability of the area. Malak, Natasha and Oz’s plans to travel to Tindi, a small historical aoul, or village, in the Caucasus, are prematurely aborted after they receive news of a general lack of security and military clashes between Russian forces and Dagestani militants (70). In such an exile, the characters’ interest in the past becomes a way of amending their present. As postcolonial individuals, their agency is strongly tied to the colonial past and Orientalist ideological

\(^{27}\) An example of this is found in Benjamin Lytal’s article, “The Chechen Grievance: Tolstoy’s ‘Hadji Murad’ After Boston”: www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/04/21/the-chechen-greivance-tolstoy-s-hadji-murad-after-boston.html.
Aboulela depicts the relation between the past and the agentic experience of the contemporary characters. Their perception of Shamil’s history, which is, as chapter 2 explains, influenced by Orientalist accounts, reflects their views of religious agency as being either spiritual or extremist. This identifies the agentic aspects they attempt to retrieve from this past. Malak’s relation to Shamil’s past differs from Oz’s. The manner in which their ideas of agency parallel their perspective on jihad signifies a sense of exile and victimisation that equates empowerment with resistance. Malak finds in Shamil’s spirituality a resource for her modern form of Sufism. Malak, and later Natasha, follow a peaceful and diverse modern-day version of Shamil’s Sufism (311). Oz, on the other hand, confines his aspirations to the military aspects of Shamil’s struggle. He conducts research on weapons, supposedly sparked by the presence of Shamil’s sword, which hung in their dining room and was ultimately seized by the British anti-terrorism unit (313). Without a comprehensive knowledge of this past, Orientalist narratives and the ideological struggle between Islamic schools continue to hinder the agentic experiences of Muslim individuals. Because the depiction of this polarity is associated with the engagement of female protagonists’ struggle for agency, the manner in which the agentic action is designed in relation to these ideologies is significant. Aboulela’s novel operates on an anti-imperialist paradigm based on an examination of the components of Islamic ideologies and the way they are affected by Orientalist anthropologies. In this novel, the secularisation of Sufism is represented side by side with the terrorism of Salafism.

Aboulela’s main characters are strong advocates of one or the other of these schools. However, a marginal character, Oz’s girlfriend, articulates a solid opinion of the antagonism between the contemporary extremist Salafism and Sufism while conversing with Natasha (208). In this conversation, she tells Natasha that the majority of the Muslim Students’ Society (MSS) exhibit contempt for Oz’s mother being an actress (207). This attitude is also shared by an extremist speaker who is invited to give a speech in the mosque (207-8). This speaker is described as anti-Sufi, a believer in gender segregation and an extremist who could be “on some list or other” for his secret involvement in radical activities (208). The extent to which the convictions of the MSS members comply with that of the speaker is not made clear. However, they are together in their opinions about “how a good Muslim woman should be,” which cast Oz as an outsider (207). The final agreement is ironical, for in the middle of these ideological troubles, the situation of Muslim women in Shari’a is frequently debated with resolute voices.
As a result of this antagonism, Malak receives hate mail after Oz’s arrest, in which the sender addresses her as a “slut” and says, “Serves you right for taking off your clothes just to entertain the British public” (216). Malak states that she has never performed a single “nude scene” (2016). The fact that Malak is a spiritual “teacher disguised as an actor” (314) may have challenged the collective moral responsibility that could be represented in relation to her local Muslim community. Malak’s faith remains private, and the only judgement left to Muslim agents, who are reduced by Aboulela to a number of extremists, stems from her profession as an actress. Collective moral responsibility can be overridden by extremists who utilise their authority to propagate their personal judgements and antagonisms. Aboulela represents the tension in the two parties’ perception of religious agency. In the absence of a moderate collective moral agency, Malak’s religious agency seems to take a secular path. Overall, in The Kindness, the representation of the ideological conflicts of the past and the present provides a way to comprehend the problematic lack of authentic and robust models of religious agency in postcolonial Muslim societies.

5. Conclusion:

Aboulela’s Islamic feminist project is not one of retrieval. Her feminist writings outline and testimonialise supportive patriarchy as an exemplary model of gender relations that is observed as a production of historical ideological and social context. Contemporary Muslim women are portrayed by Aboulela as enduring the anxiety caused by the Islamic ideological struggle. Their agencies are cast in the fragmented moulds of these ideologies. Muslim women’s patterns of agency are lifeless in terms of their inability to evolve and to contain the requirements of modern-day aspects of empowerment. Aboulela’s historical narrative explicates the roots of the dysfunction of religious agency in the contemporary day. Her historical writing reveals that Orientalist depictions of historical events are a cornerstone of the West’s perception of Islam and the gender relations provided within the religious framework.

Biased historical writing, for Aboulela, complicates the modern perception of past gender relations, rendering Shari’a concepts such as qiwamah hard to perceive and realise. Aboulela’s depiction of contemporary women’s struggle for agency shows the problematic situation resulting from this historiography. The inability to achieve this agency shows that both men and women are unable to arrive at a stable and empowering understanding of their Islamic identities. In Aboulela’s view, women’s agency is severely affected because they have to endure the dysfunction of the supportive patriarchy caused by misogynist traditions. Aboulela’s narrative exemplifies the extent to which women’s empowerment within Islam remains an object of complex controversies.
Aboulela’s depiction of Muslim women’s agency complicates the tension within Islamic schools and with secularism. This tension is highlighted throughout Aboulela’s narrative of the present-day Muslim women’s situation in both The Kindness and Minaret. Whereas the female protagonist in the spiritual utopia of “Days Rotate” finds a certain path towards agency, contemporary characters can only find agency in private spirituality. The ideological conflict between contemporary Salafism and Sufism has done little to make religious agency attainable. As far as the modern West is concerned, contemporary Sufism is a secular spirituality, and contemporary Salafism is a source of terrorism. As for Aboulela’s protagonists, they seek agency only to find themselves caught in a web of Salafism, Sufism and Western modernity.
Chapter 4: Intuitional Knowledge and Women’s Agency in Nacer Khemir’s Film

1. **Waḥdat al-wujūd—Knowledge and Creativity:**

Sufi literary and cinematic production associated with waḥdat al-wujūd features agency as integral to a perpetual spiritual journeying in pursuit of intuitional knowledge. For the followers of Ibn ‘Arabi’s Sufism, knowledge, *ʿilm*, is spiritual rather than material. Sufism perceives knowledge as integral to the spiritual illumination resulting from mystical unification. In his book Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam (2007), Franz Rosenthal explains that Ibn ‘Arabi saw knowledge as a form of theophanic light that enables the transcendence of human consciousness through unity with the Divine. Because the Divine holds the ultimate knowledge, unifying oneself with Him leads to an openness to this knowledge (157). The idea of knowledge as a theophanic light leads many Sufi writers to identify knowledge with light or fire (157). This description finds its way into literary depictions. As the analysis of the works under scrutiny will reveal, knowledge as “light” becomes the subject of artistic depictions.

An example of the artistic expressions of this association of knowledge, light and love can be seen in literary representations of women. Many literary works that follow Ibn ‘Arabi’s philosophy tend to emphasise the image of women as a medium of spiritual enlightenment. This association is established in response to Ibn ‘Arabi’s ideology of the “theophanic light”, which reflects his conviction that his relationship with Nizam was one way to approach union with God.

Contrary to the common understanding that connects women with nafs, thus blaming them for men’s sins, Ibn ‘Arabi associated women with the Divine dhat, or “divine essence,” believing that “the feminine aspect is the form in which God can best be recognised” (Schimmel 102). Ibn ‘Arabi’s perspective on women translates itself in his poetry dedicated to women, who are depicted as “forms of divine wisdom, which make the heart of the gnostic rejoice” (102).

Henry Corbin, in Alone with the Alone: The Creative Imagination of Ibn ‘Arabi (published in French in 1958 and in English in 1997) explains that the feminine in Ibn ‘Arabi’s ideology occupies a space that is neither completely physical nor completely

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28 Nizam bin Makīn al-Dīn Zāhir ibn Rustam, a Persian Sufi woman whom Ibn ‘Arabi met while in Mecca (Shaikh 102-3).

29 The nafs can be defined as “the lower souls” who tempt men and contaminate the purity of men’s souls with worldly desires (Schimmel 428).
allegorical (139). In Ibn ‘Arabi’s philosophy, a spiritual woman is agentive because she is a theophany. In his description of Nizam, he reflects on her intellectual, spiritual and physical superiority. However, his idealisation of the theophany does not necessarily indicate that this Sufism is an ultimate advocate of women’s agency. The binary views of women, as dhat and nafs, represent contrasting views of women within this ideology. As the following scrutiny of Alem’s and Khemir’s depictions of women’s agency will reveal, Ibn ‘Arabi’s conceptualisation of the theophanic woman continues to affect the representation of women in Sufi works of art. Khemir’s Bab’Aziz captures the necessity of inward reflection to discover the essence of light. Light appears in the image of the main female character, Noor—whose name means literally “light”—who urges her lover to walk the path of God. Women are the essence of light, and through their light, men can approach the Divine. This mutual relationship that associates women with Divine light is also present in Raja Alem’s work. Alem articulates this perspective in her depiction of the idealised character, Hamida Khaja, who has inherited knowledge and wisdom from her ancestors (156). For Khemir and Alem, the relationship between God and man is incomplete without woman.

As the discussion of Alem’s My Thousand and One Nights will show in chapter 5, the binary in the depiction of women as dhat, being theophany, or nafs, being associated with the lustful body, paves the way for a patriarchal theorisation that is inclined towards essentialising the latter within women’s mysticism. As chapter 5 will show, the perspective of knowledge as elitist, thus requiring spiritual advancement and transcendental detachment from the body, leads to confining spiritual knowledge to male mystics who, allegedly, are able to transcend the body (Jantzen 188). For Alem, this affects women’s agency because women’s agency is bound to their ability to acquire knowledge. Alem does not reject the duality of transcendental versus bodily, and the discussion of Fatma will show how transcendental mysticism is necessary to acquire intuitional knowledge, however; she rejects its gendered basis. Alem finds in theophany a suitable framework to refute this patriarchal duality, but she engages with it critically.

This chapter discusses Khemir’s view of intuitional knowledge as integral to an individualistic experience. Khemir’s film elucidates that spirituality is approached via an internal journey towards the divine and the inner self. Spirituality is achieved only when this journey unfolds on self-knowledge. Due to the complexity of the meanings of divinity

30 Ibn ‘Arabi says in his description of Nizam: “When she spoke concisely she was a marvel of eloquence; when she expounded an argument, she was clear and transparent. . .” (Shaikh 103).
in the works of Khemir and Alem and the pagan implications of their utilisations of Sufi motifs, the word “divine” will be written in lowercase.

2. **Spiritual Knowledge in Bab’Aziz:**

*Bab’Aziz* (2005) is the last of Khemir’s feature trilogy, which includes *The Wanderers of the Desert* (1984) and *The Dove’s Lost Necklace* (1990). Though the three films are deeply interconnected in their motifs, themes, backgrounds and visuals, *Bab’Aziz* is the desert trilogy’s grand conclusion. This film represents the culmination of Khemir’s ideological and cinematic capabilities on multiple levels. Above all, the film exemplifies Khemir’s artistic quest to emphasise the tolerisation and comprehensiveness of Islam.³¹

In an interview with Youssef Rakha entitled “Nacer Khemir: Orphan of Civilisation” (2006), Khemir explains that by directing *Bab’Aziz*, he intends to “wipe the mud” that has tarnished the face of Islam after the events of 9/11: “Suppose you were walking with your father on the street and he fell and got mud on his face. What do you do then? You help him up and wipe the mud off his face” (para. 4). To clear the face of Islam, Khemir uses his films to highlight the tolerance that Sufism can offer. Sufism interprets the universality of Islam’s essential message as providing multiple and individualistic spiritual paths. Khemir uses this tolerant perspective to subvert narratives that blame Islam for terrorist actions undertaken in its name and to contest radical perspectives used to justify violence in the name of religion. Khemir’s representation of this Sufi tolerance simultaneously aims to defend Islam in general from such extremism and to defend Sufism, from the monolithic views of extremists. Literal and extremist interpretations of the textual traditions exclude Sufism from the Islamic community and view its notion of wahdat al-wujūd as blasphemy. Thus, Khemir recognises the need to foster understanding not only of Islam in general, but also one of its often misunderstood and marginalised incarnations—Sufism.

The film follows a dervish named Bab’Aziz through his spiritual and physical journeys, which extend until his death. The narrative of the two journeys takes a unilineal and profound symbolic style. The film begins with Bab’Aziz and his granddaughter Ishtar emerging from the sand after a sandstorm. The two embark on a journey to a gathering held for dervishes every thirty years. They make their way to this gathering with no understanding of its exact time or place, relying instead on their internal guides, an idea

³¹ The discussion of the film is enriched by Firoozeh Papan-Matin’s “Nacer Khemir and the Subject of Beauty in Bab’Aziz: The Prince Who Contemplated His Soul” (2012). In-text citation shows elements derived from Papan-Matin’s article. Themes raised by her and either developed or dealt with differently here include fatherhood and the film as a qasida.
exemplified further by Bab’Aziz’s physical blindness. Bab’Aziz tells Ishtar a story of the “Prince who contemplates his soul.” A gazelle captures the Prince’s attention, and he follows the animal to a pond. The Prince’s subjects are alarmed when the Prince’s horse returns unaccompanied, so they embark on a search and eventually find the Prince sitting at the pond contemplating his soul. The Prince wakes after a long contemplation to find that the dervish who observed him has left him a dervish’s clothing. The Prince dresses in them and begins his own journey.

During Bab’Aziz and Ishtar’s journey, they meet other travellers who strive to reach the same dervish gathering for various reasons. Two youthful men, Zaïd and Osman, join Bab’Aziz and Ishtar to find the women they love. Zaïd explains how he met Noor in a poetic circle and fell in love with her after winning an international Qur’anic competition. After listening to Zaïd’s singing, Noor tells him that the poem he sings, written originally by Rumi, is her father’s. The unification of the couple is short and vague: Zaïd wakes up alone in a hotel room, seemingly after consummating their romantic relationship, only to find that Noor has left in search of her father. She leaves Zaïd a letter explaining that she recognises in Zaïd’s voice “a call” from her father. She takes Zaïd’s glasses, clothes and passport to disguise herself. The logical justification for this act is that the country to which she is travelling bans women from travelling alone. The issues of travelling and national borders also are represented in Osman’s story. Osman explains to Bab’Aziz and Ishtar that he planned to travel with the help of a smuggler to a land with “no sand,” a journey that led him, through a sequence of incidents, to experience a vision of his beloved Zahra. Zahra is a princess in whom Osman recognises his own heavenly palace. The palace and the costumes of the princess and her servants resemble those of a past Islamic era, seemingly Andalusian. The use of Andalusian architectural designs and costumes, which also appear in Khemir’s previous film, The Dove’s Lost Necklace, highlights Khemir’s perspective of an archetypal city of past Islamic civilisation.

In addition to Zaïd and Osman, Ishtar and Bab’Aziz meet with other travellers. Among them is Hassan, a man travelling the desert to find the red-haired dervish he believes murdered his twin brother, Hussein. Unlike Hassan, Hussein, who is a friend of Osman, is a mystic whose death is depicted as a voluntary choice made to unite with his mystical beloved. In the desert, Hassan is robbed of his clothes by a thief. Exhausted and thirsty, he collapses and edges towards death but is saved by the red-haired dervish. The dervish explains to Hassan the meaning of the divine love that motivated Hussein to seek death. Hassan’s introduction to Sufism is completed by Bab’Aziz upon his death. Bab’Aziz tells Hassan that he waits for him to “witness” his death and leaves him his clothing.
symbolising his Sufi heritage. The film ends with Hassan’s walk, suggesting a new journey about to unfold off screen in the audiences’ own lives.32

Khemir’s cinematic works are heavily affiliated with Sufi ideology, which perceives the universe as an open book of knowledge, or gnosia. Spiritual knowledge of God’s path can be obtained through contemplation of the universe and the human being. Throughout Bab’Aziz, the ensemble of dervishes journey together towards a Sufi gathering. The various activities in which they engage during their journey, including storytelling, singing, dancing and empathising with each other and with other creatures, are depicted as potential ways to uncover the spiritual path. Their search for the gathering is representative of the Sufi search for the divine. The film suggests that the ways to approach the divine are heterogeneous and individualistic. The epigraph with which the film starts states “there are as many paths which lead to God as there are men on earth.” This is explained further by Bab’Aziz: “He who has faith will never get lost. Everyone uses his most precious gift to find his way.” Each of the travellers is in the process of searching for his or her own individual road to the gathering. However, to discover the best way to approach the road to the gathering, the travellers must know themselves. Khemir’s film suggests that developing a way to the divine occurs through the individual’s contemplation of his or her own heart.

This notion of individualistic paths to the divine is an established Sufi perspective, known as ‘man’arafa nafsahu faqad ‘arafa rabbahu’, or “who knows himself knows his Lord” (Schimmel 189). This statement relates to Ibn ‘Arabi’s theorisation of wahdat al-wujūd, which perceives the divine as inhabiting a selected elite of his creatures. In her book, Mystical Dimensions of Islam (1975), Annemarie Schimmel explains that the Sufi notion of wisdom, mainly taken from the Qur’anic verse reading “We will show them our signs across the horizons and in their own souls, until they clearly see that it is the Truth” (41:53), involves contemplating both the universe and oneself (189). Schimmel explains that such verses are highly appreciated in Sufism due to the way they assert the perfection of man (189). This in turn, Schimmel continues, legitimises Sufism’s notion of theophany. The aforementioned verse, for example, is interpreted by Ibn ‘Arabi’s Sufism as “God’s order to look into their own hearts to find the source of knowledge and, eventually, the divine beloved, who is ‘closer than the jugular vein’” (50:16) (189). Internalising and privatising the bond with God and relating that connection to contemplation is an important feature of Sufism and is utilised by Khemir in his rebuke of terrorist acts done in the name of Islam.

32 Roy Armes (2010) indicates that Khemir’s films do not show a true conclusion but rather end with signs of a new tale that is about to happen (80).
In addition to its emphasis on the individuality of connection to God, Khemir underscores Sufism’s perception of heterogeneity in Islam, which is often neglected and even defied by fundamentalist interpretations. For Ibn ‘Arabi’s Sufism and Khemir himself, the belief in one ultimate interpretation of Islam stifles innovation and creativity. By homogenising the road to God into a singular framework, such monolithic interpretations treat opposing perspectives with antagonism and foster the conditions for extremism and terrorism. Khemir contests such readings by asserting the role of contemplation of the human and the universe. The forthcoming discussion of the way Khemir attempts to visualise some Qur’anic verses, particularly the Light Verse, confirms that he perceives in the human the best personification of the texts. He sees religious texts as an important guide towards spiritual advancement, but he does not prioritise them over contemplation. This tendency contests presumptions made by scholastic Islamic schools and Western Orientalists about the complete detachment of this Sufism from textual resources. The cultural and textual wealth of Bab’Aziz proves such perspectives to be reductive.

3. Desert as a Space of Contesting Fundamentalism:

One method by which Khemir attempts to emphasise the heterogeneity and tolerisation of Sufism as a counterpoint to extremist perspectives is his depiction of the desert in Bab’Aziz. The desert scenes were filmed in various sites in Tunisia and Iran. The last scene was filmed in the Iranian ruin of Bam two months before its complete destruction by an earthquake (Armes 80). The desert captured in the film is described by Khemir as “a character in itself” (in an interview in the Bab’Aziz press book, translated by Roy Armes 77), specifically referring to the desert’s tough climatic conditions.

Despite its practical challenges, the desert in Bab’Aziz can be viewed as a symbol of Khemir’s understanding of spiritual space. Papan-Matin explains that the desert can be perceived as symbolising the mystical space, spiritual valleys and planes travelled by Sufi truth seekers (109). It also represents, Papan-Matin continues, an “existential metaphor for the transitory nature of life and the imminent presence of death: the final return to dust” (109). This understanding, Papan-Matin explains, is enhanced by the circular structure of the film, starting with the birth of Ishtar, who emerges from the sand, and ending with the death of Bab’Aziz and his return to the ground (117). Papan-Matin sees this circularity as

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33 The Light Verse reads “God is the Light of heavens and the earth. His light may be compared to a niche that enshrines a lamp, the lamp within a crystal of star-like brilliance. It is lit from a blessed olive tree neither eastern nor western. Its very oil would almost shine forth, though no fire touched it. Light upon light; God guides to His light whom He will. God speaks in parable to mankind. God has Knowledge of all things” (24:35 [translated by N. J. Dawood]).
depicting a Qur'anic verse: “From the earth We have created you and to the earth We will restore you and from it We will bring you back to life” (20:55) (117). Another, and slightly distinct, dimension of the desert gains its meaning from the Western view of Arabs as exotic inhabitants of the desert: “Oriental cliché as a landmark in which Arabs and Muslims are often seen with their camels in Hollywood films and in commercial advertisements and brands” (109). Oriental fantasies of the desert and its inhabitants influence the film’s presentation indirectly, as Sufis are portrayed in such fantasies as lacking in education. Rejecting this perspective also serves as an artistic objective for Khemir, secondary to repudiating terrorism.

Bab’Aziz adopts symbolic notions of the desert by presenting the space as one that facilitates the rebirth of spiritual insight by extracting it from beneath the debris of the accumulated materialism that has become a landmark of modern life. Travelling against the sweeping current of materialistic temptations, the dervishes’ spiritual journeying is akin to the Bedouins’ dangerous travel in search of water or clan. Within the film, the spiritual quest is the fundamental heritage passed from one generation to another. Another text that depicts the desert in a similar manner is Ibrahim Al-Koni’s novel, The Bleeding of the Stone. In this novel, the desert’s adverse climate and geographical conditions act both to repel materialistic, unspiritual individuals, such as Cain, and to fortify spiritual individuals’ quest for purification.

The interconnection of spirituality and desert life illustrates how the Sufi’s spiritual contemplation of the universe is analogous to the Bedouin travelling of the desert in that both require an intuitional guide. In her article, “Critical Appropriations: One Desert, Three Narratives” (2002), Laura Rice suggests that spiritual insight is related to the special skill of desert reading, or firasa (143). Journeying through the desert is known by the Bedouins to require firasa, which, as Jibrail S. Jabbur explains in his book The Bedouins and the Desert: Aspects of Nomadic Life in the Arab East (1995), enables the Bedouin to cross the desert safely (Jabbur 324-6). It is only by using this instinct that nomads can find their way in the extended and continually transient landscape. Jabbur illustrates how firasa attracts many orientalists’ attention because they see in it “something practically prophetic” (324). Indeed, the ability to ascertain facts with no physical or empirical evidence amaze orientalist travellers in the desert. These travellers’ reliance on the skills of Bedouin guides, who successfully assist them to survive the desert’s wilderness, result in their belief in firasa. Otherwise, firasa can be perceived superficially as an irrational practice. Like firasa, spiritual insight requires a tolerant interaction in order to be understood.
In fact, the profound analogy between Bedouins’ firasa and spiritual insight is addressed directly by many Sufi scholars, such as Abu ‘I-Qasim al-Qushayri (986-1072) in his al-Qushayri’s Epistle on Sufism (first published in English in 2007). Al-Qushayri entitled a section regarding an explanation of spiritual insight “bab al-firasa” (242 in English translation and 266 in the Arabic original). He explains that the term firasa is derived from the etymological root farisa, or prey, because this insight “possesses” the heart of the Sufi like the “wild animal” overpowers the prey (242). In Al-Qushayri’s account, firasa is utilised to connote spiritual insight, therefore suggesting linguistic synonymy of the two terms.

In al-Qushayri’s account, spiritual insight can be received without pursuit. Spiritual insight, like firasa, can be intuitive. Spiritual insight and firasa are necessary to guide the traveller through the most adverse circumstances. The functionality of firasa can be emphasised as preceding and competing with modern navigational inventions. Similarly, for Khemir, spiritual insight subverts the conviction that scriptural guidance is the sole method for approaching God. Just as the Bedouin nomad seeks guidance from ecology, the Sufi must read the book of the universe through contemplation to arrive safely at his or her spiritual destination. Bab’Aziz, despite his blindness, finds his way both physically and spiritually through internal insight. In fact, for Khemir, the emphasis on the role of insight as contesting fundamentalist readings of the scriptures reiterates the Prophet’s inability to read the text due to his illiteracy. Rice explains:

Mohammed is not expected to read with his eyes, but rather to look into his heart where the eternal text resides. The desert is not a blank page criss-crossed with infinite paths among which we wander looking for the Promised Land, nor is it a wasteland in which we suffer, longing for redemption, rather it is a fullness of signs showing the right path. (143)

Like a desert crossing that requires an experienced eye, reading the religious text requires a spiritual eye. Khemir, in The Wisdom of Islam (1994), tells the story of a blind Sufi mystic whose eyesight returns to him as he opens the Qur’an to read, “like a lamp that makes an end of night” (no pagination). Redefining reading as an act of internal insight renders the process entirely spiritual. In this way, reading in the sense of approaching the text’s intended message becomes independent of the physical eye and intellectual abilities. Perceiving firasa as a synonym of spiritual insight may enable a heterogeneity of ways of identifying and approaching the divine or human beloved.

The utilisation of firasa as a way of recognising the beloved’s land is often found in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry. The poets describe longing for an absent beloved as a
motivation for using firasa. In this case, firasa becomes a way of approaching the beloved by contemplating her traces. In her book, The Mute Immortals Speak: Pre-Islamic Poetry and the Poetics of Rituals (1993), Susan Pinckney Stetkevych explains how the pre-Islamic qasida, which she defines broadly as connoting a metred poem and as mostly influenced by the desert’s social and cultural structure, tends to start with the ‘nasib, “consisting of the description of the abandoned encampment and the traces of the poet’s beloved mistress who once dwelled there,” followed by rahl, which “describes the poet’s journey through the desert and his mount, the she-camel, with comparisons of her to wild creatures, notably the oryx cow or bull, the onager, and the ostrich” (4). The final part of the qasida can be either faqhr, in which the poet may praise his tribe; madih, the “praise of the ruler”; or hija’, meaning “invective” (4). The first two parts of the qasida are closely related to the motives of Bab’Aziz, whereas the absence of the third can be attributed to the Sufi tendency to boast of lineages connected to the Prophet or Sufi imams rather than tribal relations. In fact, the interest in lineages may contribute to Sufi artistic attempts to revive historical figures, a feature evident in Khemir’s film through his utilisation of archetypes.

Referring to such structure, Laura Rice explains that the qasida starts by envisagig the absent community that previously lived in the beloved’s area and the way the process of searching for the traces of the encampment leads to the contemplation of nature (132). Nature’s ability to “outlast” human culture renders it an agent of erasure or preservation of such traces (132). As the poet attempts to revive the memory of his absent beloved, he gives voice to nature: “in the desert, presence and absence are not opposites but rather concepts that subsist within one another, the way speech exists in silent stones or the beloved’s presence arises from her absence” (133). The desert itself, Rice continues, is an indication of the presence of Eden, a reminder of Adam’s exile from Paradise (133). Bringing the absent to life through the desert’s nature attests to the poet’s ability to see what others cannot.

Because of its poetic and visual imagery, Bab’Aziz encouraged many of its reviewers to call the film “a visual poem” (Godfrey, no pagination). The frequent recitation of poems written by prominent Sufi and postcolonial poets as well as the less well-known fragments sung in the final gathering, seem more integral to the thematic and artistic structure of the film than the rhetoric. Rice explains that to some extent, the strong presence of the desert inspired the utilisation of the absence–presence approach, which became popular in pre-Islamic poems (132-3). In Bab’Aziz, the absence–presence approach is deployed on many levels: the absence of the inhabitants of the ruins that were once flourishing with Islamic civilisation; the sudden and unjustified loss of the beloved
theophany; the lost lovers of Zaïd and Osman—Noor and Zahra, respectively—which incurs perpetual travelling, or rahil; and the physical and cultural absence of national borders, which invite the investigation of the time and place of the narratives undertaken in the film. All of these are essential elements of the film that can only be approached by contemplating the available signs. The viewer must adopt the role of the poet or the Bedouin who reads, via contemplation, what Khemir’s desert consolidates. The viewer could also undertake the role of the blind sage who can see and perceive the desert’s signs. This process asserts Khemir’s perspective that internal insight precedes logical interpretations of scriptures for making sense of the world.

Above all, in Khemir’s world, the true nature of existence is spiritual. This perspective leads him, as he explained in an interview with Youssef Rakha, to visualise his ideas by “abstraction”:

Narrative, for me, is transcendent. It becomes transcendent through abstraction. It is a kind of Islamic thought, too. When I point to something, I am indicating 10 times that thing, but nine out of 10 parts of the whole remain invisible. A way of Islamic thought, as I said, and a way of confirming the cultural density. (no pagination)

The ability to approach “invisible” connotations is exclusive to those with spiritual insight. Influenced by Ibn ‘Arabi’s idea of the elitism of spiritual knowledge, Khemir’s film is saturated with signs and symbols, many of which are embodiments of grand Sufi notions or Qur’anic verses that resist simple interpretations. The complex symbolism of the film renders contemplation of its stills necessary both for developing a sound understanding of and experiencing a pleasurable engrossment in the Islamic heritage. The wealth of paintings, architecture and poetry depicted in the background of scenes in Bab’Aziz adds profound meaning to the scene or to a character’s dialogue.

Because examples of how artistic objects contribute to the film’s scenes will be discussed throughout this chapter, it is necessary to mention that the film itself is inspired by a miniature. In an interview in the Bab’Aziz press book, Khemir explains that he received a postcard from his sister with a picture of a Persian plate “that was painted in the twelfth century. It shows a prince leaning over water, and it carries the inscription, ‘The prince who contemplated his own soul’” (translated by Armes 77). Khemir places this portrait within a broader context—the world in which the plate was painted. Depicting this world from the perspective of the Sufi painter of the plate necessitates the depiction of the mystical and cultural signs the world offers for contemplation. Understanding and interpreting the painting on the plate and even the scenes of the film, like contemplation of the universe, is subject to individualistic perspectives. This equates the literary and artistic
product with God’s creation, as both can inspire insight. Therefore, the film’s visual creativity defies monolithic fundamentalism.

4. The Postcolonial Desert:

From a postcolonial perspective, Khemir’s desert plays a key role. It depicts the fragmentation and deterioration of the postcolonial Arab and Islamic states by utilising the absence–presence approach. The absence of national boundaries in past Islamic civilisation raises questions about the history and legitimacy of the present postcolonial borders. The pressure these boundaries impose on Osman and Noor operates as a striking delineation of the extent to which boundaries tend to shape and reshape the lives of postcolonial individuals. In order to facilitate a comparison of the past and present situations, the film highlights the desert ruins as landmarks of the absent Islamic civilisation, which has been reduced to decay by colonisation. It attempts, just like the pre-Islamic poets, to recreate the communities that inhabited these ruins. It does so through the depiction of the Prince’s city. The story of the Prince is narrated by Bab’Aziz, who indicates that it took place in the distant past. Therefore, the story serves as a good example of the targeted societies. This city has a gate, but it does not have walls. It is divided into territories marked only by colourful flags adorned with calligraphy. The physical openness of the city is analogous to its cultural diversity, which manifests in multiple ways, such as the kathak dance the Prince attends and the Prince’s robe.

The kathak is a Hindu religious ritual. In the kathak, which means “to tell a story” according to Papan-Matin, the dancers wear an anklet of small bells on their legs to “produce sounds and movements that convey a religious epic or traditional tale” (119). Khemir does not intend to represent the Prince’s attendance at a dancing ritual as a form of entertainment. In religious and political contexts, entertainment can be perceived negatively as a distraction from primary purposes. In the Islamic caliphate, the Prince is required to undertake serious military duties. This role is indicated by the embroidery on the Prince’s yurt, which includes an Arabic statement, “la galib illa Allah,” meaning “only God is victorious,” a popular Andalusian motto that adorns palaces, specifically the Alhambra’ Palace. The Prince seems to occupy a high position in the caliphate court. This position signifies the ritualistic meaning of the dance as a spiritual narrative. Khemir’s image of the spiritual Prince pairs authority with devotion.

Adopting rituals from neighbouring civilisations could be intrinsic to the nature of Sufism. However, in the Prince’s story, cultural interaction is captured in other aspects. The Prince’s robe, in addition to its political and religious significance, which will be revisited shortly, indicates cultural proximity to neighbouring civilisations: an Indian
design of kurta made with silk, possibly Chinese, and embroidered with Arabic calligraphy, the royal robe is a profound display of such interaction. Such proximity may have geographical justification. In particular, the kathak ritual and the switch between Arabic and Farsi in the dialogue suggest that the city is located in the East Asian part of the past Islamic empire.

In his article, “From Court Dress to the Symbol of Authority: Robing and 'Robes of Honour' in Pre-Colonial India” (1986), Balkrishan Shivram discusses the cultural influence of Islamic civilisation on certain parts of India and East Asia, taking the practice of khil’at as an example. Shivram explains that khil’at, an Arabic term meaning “robe of honour,” was introduced around the eighth century (CE) by Muslim caliphs to convey political meanings (1-2). When the caliph grants his subject a khil’at, mostly made of Chinese silk and adorned with embroidery, he shows that he provides the subject with a specific “rank” or “authority” within the empire (8). The khil’at symbolises that the caliph is “incorporating” the appointed subject “into his own body” and permitting him to embody the caliph’s rule (6). In Bab’Aziz, the Prince’s robe attests to his position as a political Islamic leader.

Culturally, khil’at, as Shivram argues, represents the diversity within precolonial Islamic civilisation and its commercial and political interaction with other civilisations, including the Chinese and the Indians (8). Shivram explains that the khil’at was adapted as a cultural costume along the eastern boundaries of the Islamic civilisation in Indian, Punjabi and Bengali courts (2). The khil’at may include other presents, such as rings, Arabian horses and saddles (10). Therefore, the khil’at functions as an expression of crossing boundaries and cultural transaction.

Above all, the geographical distance of the desert city from Islamic metropoles did not cause cultural or political isolation. The city is exposed to routes of cultural interaction both with the Islamic centre and with other neighbouring cultures. The Prince’s robe, the kathak rituals and even the Andalusian embroidery on the Prince’s yurt hint at the diversity and expansion of precolonial Islamic civilisation. Such elements aid Khemir’s attempt to represent what he refers to, in an interview with Khemais Khayati (1995), as “the richness of the individual in Arab-Islamic culture”:

In the same manner that I tried to recreate an image of a city in the eleventh century, giving it the Arab-Islamic touch of those centuries, I also tried to recreate a human group that could have and—at least presumably—would have inhabited that splendour and framework. . . I feel that the richness of the individual in Arab-Islamic culture is derived from numerous tastes: from the Indian, to the
Mogul, the Pakistani and the African... and this is what constitutes this richness of the Arab individual. (257)

The recall of the diverse Islamic civilisation is accompanied by fusing boundaries between people, their beliefs and their physical expressions of such beliefs. Although the issue of whether Khemir’s portrayal represents an idealisation of this past society will be raised later in the chapter, the process of “pasting” or creating a “collage” of this community (Khemir in interview with Khayati 257) in the postcolonial context is significant. As previously indicated, such a representation provides a way of interrogating the legitimacy of modern nation-states.

Khemir, in the aforementioned interview, describes the anxiety that may befall contemporary Arabs due to the deterioration and fragmentation of the Arab states (259). Through the visual image of ruins in Bab’Aziz, the audience is reminded of the role of colonial powers in the destruction of Islamic civilisation and the introduction of national borders. The society that once inhabited the ruins, in both Tunisian and Iranian deserts and across the symbolised past cities within the caliphate territories, is permanently lost. Khemir attempts to revive some details of the lives of these lost peoples by encouraging the audience to contemplate the lost society’s traces, including architecture and costumes.

Borders are directly addressed in the film in two principal instances: when Osman attempts to migrate illegally with the help of a smuggler and when Noor disguises herself as a man to cross the border in search of her father. These occurrences connote the fragility of human identification as induced by national borders. These identities, which tend to label and divide human beings, can, ironically, be easily fabricated. Because, as previously indicated, Khemir’s desert asserts that the true nature of existence is spiritual, Khemir attempts to challenge such identifications by emphasising spiritual, geographical and ancestral belonging.

Exhausted by the hardship of working as a sand carrier, Osman, who in this case represents postcolonial youths, attempts to migrate to a place “where there is no sand.” His preparations involve consulting a smuggler who works in the tavern, a place with suspicious connotations—as demonstrated by Osman cautiously checking his surroundings before entering to avoid being seen. Osman and the smuggler converse in Arabic in front of a wall with a painting depicting the Islamic narrative of the Prophet Ibrahim and his son Ismail at the scene of Ismail’s slaughter. Ibrahim and Ismail are both gazing at the
scapegoat descending from the sky with an angel. Commonly known as the father of the Arabs, or Abu al Arab, the image of Ismail’s impending slaughter in the smuggler’s place symbolises the extent to which borders threaten the unification of the Arabs. The suspended scapegoating captured in the painting—the looming existential threats and the perpetual wait for divine aid—represents a daily reality for postcolonial Arabs whose countries succumbed to colonial and neo-colonial aggression.

The postcolonial undertones also manifest in the film’s titular character, Bab’Aziz, pronounced in the film as Baba Aziz, whose name literally means “father dignified.” Bab’Aziz, a Sufi dervish who supports the youthful characters, represents a substitute for the threatened Arab father. Postcolonial youths may experience deprivation in their home countries. For example, Osman’s work as a sand carrier, meaningfully depicted as hereditary, shows the arduous life of many postcolonial youths. However, as Osman attempts to migrate, he experiences humiliation at the hands of the smuggler, who requests higher fees. Portraying Osman’s salvation as residing in the mystical Paradise, Khemir shows his objection to migration. Migration may, from Khemir’s standpoint, terminate postcolonial individuals’ relation to their past. He views Sufism as providing postcolonial individuals a noble heritage that assists them in facing the threat of cultural extermination by colonisation and neo-colonisation. For Khemir, Sufism abolishes the cultural orphanhood of postcolonial individuals by connecting them to their past.

In addition to Osman’s attempt at migration, borders are also directly mentioned when Noor travels to another country in search of her long-lost father. The story suggests that she is compelled to disguise herself as male because as a woman she is not permitted to travel to her destination country without a male guardian. In the Sufi view, the mystical space is not gendered, and gender is thus viewed as a worldly feature associated with the body. Noor’s obligation to alter her gender presentation to cross the border highlights borders as a functional tool of gender oppression. It also shows the extent to which gender roles define the individual, and the definition of the human in general is strictly contoured by these physical borders. Noor’s claim that Rumi is her father poses questions about cultural and spiritual fatherhood. Her bond to Rumi is revived when Zaïd chants a poem by Rumi, thus urging Noor to travel in search of her father. This reasserts the notion of how the spiritual father orients the traveller to his or her spiritual destination. Noor’s search for Rumi eventually leads her to the gathering, where she finally meets her beloved Zaïd.

34 The painting represents the Islamic narrative in which Ibrahim is ordered to kill his son as a test of his Divine love. Upon the verification of his ultimate and pure love of the Divine, which is manifested in his obedience, Ismail is saved and replaced by a goat (the story can be found in the Qur’an, 37:102-7).
Fatherhood within this spiritual quest is a connection that overpowers physical aspects of time and place. However, as in the story of Hassan and Hussein, which will be discussed below, this spiritual light is not necessarily hereditary.

5. Spiritual Ecology and the Postcolonial Desert:

The ecology of the desert serves Khemir’s postcolonial and spiritual quests. This interconnection between geography and spirituality becomes explicit in the film’s representation of desert animals. Such representation decentres human beings as objects of struggle, both the spiritual struggle against materialism and the postcolonial struggle against the influence of colonialism, and highlights a widely utilised theme in postcolonial literature that tends to connect the postcolonial subject to the ecology of the homeland. In Bab’Aziz, the gazelle is spiritual both because of Khemir’s belief in waḥdat al-wujūd and because it dwells in the desert. The gazelle in the narrative is highlighted as a companion of the Sufis in the process of their spiritual journeying, or rahil.

Returning to etymological connotations, the perspective of firasa as linked to farisa, or “prey,” reveals the beauty of the depiction of the insight-causing mystical experience in Bab’Aziz and The Bleeding of the Stone. It is no coincidence that in both works, the heart of the protagonist is “possessed” by animals. However, due to the different rules that govern power relations in mystical experience, a gazelle and a waddan, typically prey for humans, initiate the attack. They carry the mystical call that causes the annihilation of the human’s current self and his subsequent spiritual rebirth. In Bab’Aziz, a gazelle acts as a messenger to lead the Prince to his fate. The gazelle attracts the Prince’s attention and lures him out of his yurt. He chases the gazelle in a scene that Papan-Matin says “portrays a hunt in which the prince is not the hunter but the prey on the way of dying himself” (120). The death Papan-Matin refers to is the annihilation of the self in the divine, fana, after which the Prince is transformed into a dervish.

In Al-Koni’s The Bleeding of the Stone, Asouf and his father, both nomadic Tuareg, are spiritual individuals who live in perpetual solitude for the sake of their spirituality. The father imposes this solitude to avoid human beings, whom he perceives to be the source of ultimate evil (17-8). Asouf’s father insists that Asouf trust his own heart: “Listen to your heart. What would a desert man do if he lost his heart? If we lose that, we wander lost in the world, because a desert man doesn’t understand the wiles of men” (17). For him, the heart is the site of divine light (58). Asouf’s father is isolated from the Sufi groups of the oasis, the Tijani and the Qadiri, whose debate over the legitimacy and spiritual influence of eating gazelles is never resolved (108). Due to his solitary spirituality, Asouf’s father, and later Asouf himself, becomes capable of cultivating spirituality. Specifically, their separate
encounters with the waddan, an extinct wild goat (46, 61), lead them to perceive the ultimate truth, the collective spirit that unifies them with the waddan.

Khemir’s gazelle is identical to Al-Koni’s waddan. Asouf is drawn to the waddan, “his victim-executioner” (49), and finds himself “moving, on all fours, toward the possessed animal. He didn’t even know what he was trying to do. Some unknown power was pushing him to it . . . the spirit of the waddan attracts, stupefies, robs a man of his mind, takes all his will away” (46). The inverted hunt is initiated in a way similar to that in Bab’Aziz. Asouf’s hunter, however, exhibits a much more brutal power. Despite his oath never to hunt a waddan, Asouf ties the waddan’s horns with his hunting rope, only to allow the “dragging and scraping” of his own body on the edge of the slope (49). The waddan leaves Asouf hanging from a cliff for several days, during which he comes to terms with his father’s ideas about the power of the faithful heart (50-8). As the struggle of pain and thirst climax and Asouf comes closer to death, the waddan returns to save him (60). Having approached his “third state,” where the spirit hovers in a mystical space “between life and death” (68), Asouf becomes capable of recognising his father in the eyes of the waddan (61) and understands that his father unified with the waddan upon his death (61). In his own mystical experience with the waddan, Asouf is unified with the waddan and his father (66).

Both the gazelle and the waddan provoke an involuntary advent of spiritual experience. They perform the function of Solomon’s hoopoe as the medium of divine light.35 As a caller to the mystical concealed truth and by means of the absence–presence representation, the animal promotes urgent questioning of the reason for human salvation. Despite their lack of intellectual abilities, these animals play the role of mystical guide. The way in which the gazelle and waddan attract and annihilate the will of Khemir’s Prince and Al-Koni’s Asouf complicates notions of free will and autonomy. Khemir and Al-Koni assert their suspicion of a truly free will that can transcend the rules of the universe. In both cases, the will is destroyed from within to generate internal spiritual transformation. Both Khemir’s Prince and Al-Koni’s Asouf approach their inner insight without consulting scripture. In both cases, spiritual insight is reared in the desert, which echoes the mystical space in that it positions human beings as equal to their prey. Typical

35 This refers to the Qur’anic story of Solomon using the hoopoe to deliver his messages to the Queen of Shiba. The hoopoe as a messenger of spiritual knowledge is a commonly utilised theme in Sufi literature. For example, in his lengthy poem The Conference of the Birds (1187, translated 1984), Farid Ud-Din Attar shows the hoopoe as a spiritual leader of the travelling birds who attempt to find King Simorgh. In this poem, the hoopoe explains that Solomon’s glance grants him his spiritual knowledge (79).
power relations and artificial boundaries vanish in the desert in the same way they do in the mystical world.

In his book *Sufism in the Contemporary Arabic Novel* (2012), Elmarsafy discusses the significance of the desert as an “idealised” space where “rules and epistemology are not those of the rational universe” (111). Elmarsafy argues that the animal in Al-Koni’s novel represents a way of interrogating the limits of human knowledge. Referring to Stanley Cavell’s book *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (1988), Elmarsafy explains that “certain knowledge of the world is possible, but only insofar as the possibility of knowledge about things-in-themselves, or other minds-in-themselves, is abandoned” (111). The articulation of such knowledge in Al-Koni’s narrative makes the writing of the novel an act of addressing the “problem of sceptical terror via the deployment of non-human characters” (112). Elmarsafy explains that Al-Koni’s utilisation of the spiritual articulate animal is a way of ascertaining an alternative form of knowledge, spiritual insight. The Sufi idea of truth, or ḥaqīqa, held by Al-Koni transforms the Sufi or the Bedouin poet into an agent of the mystical, or a messiah (113). Elitist and hardly accessible, mystical knowledge is disguised in complex signs. Like the Bedouin’s firasa, spiritual insight highlights the mystical as a site to contest the ultimate position granted to reason by modern epistemological ideologies.

This mystical knowledge, as *Bab’Aziz* confirms, may require the messianic experience of death. Seemingly led by the chase to a pond surrounded by columns of rocks, the Prince in *Bab’Aziz* embarks on a prolonged contemplation of the divine that he sees in his own reflection (during this trance, the camera does not show the Prince’s reflection in the water’s surface). The dervish who guards him explains the situation to the Prince’s subjects, telling them that “only those who are not in love see their own reflection.” The Prince’s profound contemplation of the divine is indicated in the vizier’s announcement to the community that “the Prince is lost.” The Prince is lost both literally, as through physical absence, and symbolically through the annihilation, or fana, of his original self in the divine. The Prince known by the attendant and other members of the community is dead. He is reborn from his contemplation as a Sufi dervish, manifested when he wears the clothes left behind by the guarding dervish. The same clothing is passed at the end of *Bab’Aziz* to Hassan upon his spiritual transformation. This shows Khemir’s spiritual adaptation of the practice of *khil’at*. Clothing, symbolising the taqwa clothing, or

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36 In his study of Gamal Al-Ghitany’s novels, Elmarsafy tackled the Sufi motif of travelling as a way of revealing intuitional knowledge (78-106).
libas at-taqwa.\textsuperscript{37} is an embodiment of the spiritual heritage passed on by the spiritual father.

\textit{Bab’Aziz} not only emphasises human spirituality, but also suggests that animals and even rocks are spiritual beings. For example, the Prince, bent over the pond and “lost” in contemplation, is surrounded by a column of rocks. Some of these rocks appear to be slightly bowed towards the water, as if performing a perpetual prayer. The choice of such a background for this scene reflects that the human, whether conscious of it or not, is in the centre of a submissively spiritual universe. Such a depiction originates from Khemir’s personal belief in \textit{waḥdat al-wujūd}, meaning that every living being is occupied by a spiritual quest.\textsuperscript{38} The scene suggests that the human who abandons his ego lives in harmony with the spiritual world. Spirituality subverts boundaries between human beings, animals and other entities.

However, this spiritual universality does not connote ultimate detachment from reason. The Prince’s white kurta is embroidered with Arabic calligraphy of supplications to the divine. The Prince’s garment, which seems to reflect his spiritual situation, or \textit{ḥal},\textsuperscript{39} confirms that humans are distinct from other spiritual creatures because of their reason. Reason as a privilege is conditioned by its usability in the search for the divine. In Khemir’s view, internal insight is prioritised over reason; however, this does not suggest complete detachment from textual traditions. Religious texts can assist in identifying the mystical path.

6. Human Beings as a Source of Insight:

Among the resources for obtaining spiritual insight is human contemplation. Viewing humans and human experiences as a source of knowledge is conducted in Khemir’s film on two levels: the mystical and the corporeal. The mystical level is invoked by the notion of theophany, in which beautiful humans, most often women, appear as incarnations of the

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\textsuperscript{37} Taqwa refers to piety and observation of God’s laws. The spiritual qualities of clothing are illustrated by Ahmad Mustami in his article “Islamic Education in Civilization of Fashion Industry: Clothes Concept Reflection in Islam” (2015). According to Mustami, within the Qur’anic context, clothing is used to refer to both spiritual and physical aspects of covering or protection, or Libas-at-taqwa: “Everyone was required to knit herself this outfit. Yarns or a fiber was repentance, patience, gratitude, qana’a [contentment], pleasure, and so on” (177-8).

\textsuperscript{38} This scene seems to be a manifestation of a Qur’anic verse: “Do you not see [i.e., know] that to God prostrates whoever is in the heavens and whoever is on the earth, the sun, the moon, the stars, the mountains, the trees, the moving creatures and many of the people?” (22:18). Khemir transforms the image of such verses seen in the spiritual eye to video footage.

\textsuperscript{39} Al-Qushayri defined the “mystical state” or \textit{ḥal} as “something that descends upon the hearts [of the mystics] regardless of their intentions, their [attempts to] attract it, or their [desire to] earn it” (78). This state does not persist, but ceases suddenly.
divine, or dhat. In *Bab’Aziz*, Khemir explores the concept of theophany by representing women as objects of contemplation. On the corporeal level, the film depicts the human resource for spiritual insight as shared human experience or wisdom. In the film, these shared experiences comprise storytelling, singing, dancing and journeying. In *The Wisdom of Islam*, Khemir quotes Ibn ‘Arabi: “One cannot contemplate God directly without any medium (either perceptible or spiritual), for God per se is independent of any one world… The contemplation of God in women is the most intense and the most perfect; and the most intense union . . . is the act of love.” (no pagination)

The contemplation of the human as a theophany of the divine shapes Khemir’s representation of women in *Bab’Aziz*. Women are represented as images with no profound or independent personalities. The portrayal of the two main female characters, Noor and Zahra, is semi-realistic. Zaïd meets Noor in a poetic circle in which she is disguised in male clothing—a dark turban and garment. She is seemingly in control of the poetic assembly. After a few poems are recited, Zaïd sings Rumi’s poem:

O day, arise! The atoms are dancing.
Thanks to Him the universe is dancing.
The souls are dancing, overcome with ecstasy.
I’ll whisper in your ear
Where their dance is taking them. . .
All the atoms in the air and the desert
Know well, they seem insane. . .
Every single atom, happy or miserable,
Becomes enamoured of the sun,
of which nothing can be said

For Rumi, the ecstasy of longing for the divine overwhelms the universe. The poem’s dominant tone of sadness, or ḥuzun, reflects a Sufi tendency towards life: Sufi theologians, such as Al-Qushayri, consider sadness as a way of purifying spirituality by diverting the

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40 The closing credits of the film indicate that some “[p]oems and phrases in dialogues are inspired from Rumi, Attar, Ibn ‘Arabi and Ibn Farid.” Rumi’s poems are sung in Farsi, Rumi’s language, except for the two verses starting with “I embrace her,” which are recited in Arabic. The translation of the songs does not seem to be adapted by Khemir.
heart from the pleasures of life and towards the divine (156). The song overtakes Noor, and she experiences profound melancholy. Once alone, Noor tells Zaïd that it is her father who wrote the poem. After a night in a hotel room in which the couple seem to have consummated their love, Zaïd wakes to find that Noor has left. As discussed earlier, she has embarked on a journey to search for her father, taking Zaïd’s glasses, passport and clothes to disguise herself as a man because “over there, a woman can’t travel on her own.”

Noor’s characterisation is deeply symbolic: The literal meaning of her name is “light,” thus rendering her a personification of God’s light. Noor, as a theophany of God, bridges Zaïd’s connection to Him. Influenced by Ibn ‘Arabi, Khemir spiritualises the sexual relationship as reflecting a form of unification with the divine. As the divine is perceived to be in the heart of the believer, Zaïd and Noor’s unification allows Noor to reflect the divine within Zaïd. After their sexual encounter, Noor is reborn as Zaïd. The disguise of his clothing and passport denotes that she has lost herself in him.

Khemir’s film does not provide space for a critical reflection on social justice regarding women’s situation. The representation of restrictions on women’s movements seems to operate only as a justification for Noor’s disguise. Moreover, Khemir ignores the way the relationship of Noor and Zaïd can be legitimised. As the discussion of Alem’s novels will illustrate, spiritualising sexual relationships in Sufi ideology may cause patriarchs to amplify restrictions on women. Khemir seems to deal with this notion from the masculine viewpoint without considering the consequences that spiritualising premarital sexual relations will have on women’s liberation. However, the way he represents women as semi-realistic may justify the avoidance of such details. In fact, Roy Armes argues that this feature is true of all of Khemir’s characters throughout his films (75). As Armes explains, Khemir’s characters “are not individuals but types”; therefore, they are not expected to perform realistic, daily actions with which the audience can relate (75-7). Whether these aspects are social or legal, Khemir avoids them partially because of the interruption they can impose on spiritual pursuit.

In Osman’s story, Khemir utilises the patriarchal element as a justification of the mystical experience. Osman decides to migrate illegally to a land “where there is no sand.” However, his plans are interrupted when a calligrapher asks him to deliver a passionate, poetic letter to a married woman who speaks both Arabic and Farsi. The woman invites

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41 Al-Qushayri says: “Sadness is a state that prevents the heart from roaming in the valleys of forgetfulness [of God]. It is one of the characteristic features of the wayfarers on the Sufi path. I heard the master Abu Ali al-Daqqaq – may God have mercy on him – say: ‘The person in the state of sadness travels along the path of God in just one month a greater distance than one without sadness travels in many years’” (156). Longing is a Sufi motif representing what Schimmel calls the “infinite longing” of God for his creatures (268).
him to her house and, being illiterate, asks him to read the letter. As the woman’s husband returns home, Osman escapes from the back of the house and throws himself in a well. He then finds himself in a classical Andalusian-style palace inhabited by Zahra and other girls. Osman falls in love with Zahra and asks her to return home with him, but she, looking through the palace window, indicates a fire in the distance and suggests that it could be a camp of travellers they can join. As Osman runs towards the fire, he realises that the palace has disappeared and the fire is no more than a burning palm tree.

The camera does not show Zahra’s face. The enigma of the princess lends meaning to the female dervish’s explanation of the incident: “Paradise is in the eyes of the beholder.” Zahra is a vision, a feminine divine image exclusively for Osman’s eyes. After telling his story to the dervishes, Osman is told that his love for Zahra is only a “drop” of divine love. The dervishes urge Osman: “Do not be satisfied with a drop of water. You have to throw yourself into His stream. Continue your journey with us.” Describing his vision as a “drop” is significant. For Ibn ‘Arabi and other Sufis, water represents a medium of spiritual revelation. Revealed to him while in the well, Zahra is mystical in nature. She is Osman’s “Paradise”—his reward for a spiritual endeavour. His determination to journey with the dervishes represents the spiritual pursuit he must embark upon to acquire this reward.

The spiritual state, or hal, experienced by Zaïd and Osman happens unpredictably and is followed by the momentary departure of their beloveds. Yet, the spiritual state occurs in different circumstances in the two men’s respective stories. The semi-perpetual search for the divine and the beloved indicates the insecurity and instability of the spiritual experience in the eyes of the Sufis. Because this life is not eternal, it can only provide temporary pleasures. The glimpses of the divine, through theophanies, are short and end unpredictably. This confirms the Sufis’ cautious view of life that favours perpetual sadness. It reflects the Sufi idea of life as marked by agitation and sorrow for the loss of the original pre-birth state of unification with the divine. This Sufi perspective views

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42 Paradise is often referred to as what “no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no heart has conceived” (Jâmi’ at-Tirmîdhi 3292).

43 In Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts, Toshihiko Izutsu explains that in Ibn ‘Arabi’s writings, water has spiritual meanings. For Ibn ‘Arabi, Job’s pain is a spiritual one due to his struggle to achieve certainty, or yaqin. He is ordered by God to wash himself with water because “Water symbolizes Life that runs through all existence, and ‘washing oneself in water’ means to immerse oneself in the ‘water of existence’ and to know thereby the reality of existence” (148-9).

44 This is a Sufi conviction derived from a Qur’anic verse: “And [mention] when your Lord took from the children of Adam – from their loins – their descendants and made them testify of themselves, [saying to them], ‘Am I not your Lord?’ They said, ‘Yes, we have testified.’ [This] – lest you should say on the day of Resurrection, ‘Indeed, we were of this unaware’” (7:172). Binyamin Abrahamov explains that Sufis emphasise the overall Islamic belief that humans meet God prior to their birth. Al-Junayd (d. 910) believes
birth as a departure point at which humans are distanced from the mystical beloved by the corporeality of life.

Papan-Matin explicates how the film, starting with Ishtar’s emergence “from the earth as a young life” and ending with the death of Bab’Aziz, summarises worldly life as circular, existing between the two points of birth and death (117). The profane is depicted as short and wrapped by the mystical. Ishtar’s birth is symbolised in the way she tunnels her way out of the earth’s womb. The feminine connotation of earth as the womb that encompasses the travellers is achieved by depicting the desert as dominant and constantly present. The frequent wide shots of scenes permit the desert to occupy a great amount of screen space, as if embracing the characters like a mother’s womb.

Towards the end of the film, the audience discovers that Bab’Aziz’s journey is completed by his death. Bab’Aziz describes his death as a “wedding night” and a “marriage with eternity.” Confirming the sense of death as reunification with the beloved, Bab’Aziz says that “the time has come for me to find what I had lost.” This view of life renders it a journey through which travellers have to pursue this final and perpetual arrival. The characterisation of the mystical beloved as a woman is reiterated in the story of Osman’s friend, Hussein, the student calligrapher. In a dhikr seclusion, Hussein’s face and hair are covered. His head tilts repeatedly forward in regular beats, corresponding to the rhythm of the background song. The shadow reflected on the wall is not of Hussein but of a woman. The song playing in the background is sung in a female voice as well:

Joyous is the time
When we two are united
You and I
Two distinct forms
but one single soul

that the major quest of the Sufis is to reach this original state, in which they were in the presence of God (Abrahamov 5).

45 The earth as the mother’s womb is a widely utilised metaphor, particularly in religious discourse on death or martyrdom. Papan-Matin mentions a Qur’anic verse as a confirmation of the circularity of human life: “From the [earth] did we create you, and into it shall We return you, and from it shall We bring you out once again” (20:55).

46 Laura Rice explains that the desert can be described using various names that associate it with female experiences. For example, after the rain, the desert can be described as rasd, meaning “a pregnant woman praying for her delivery” (134).
You and I

This song, inspired by Rumi’s poem “You and I,” is interrupted by Osman’s visit and is only completed at the time of Hussein’s death, where it describes his post-death unification with the divine:

Forgetful of you and me

Joyous of the same joy

Calm and free of vain words,

You and I.

The scene of Hussein’s death comprises a woman accompanying him to the grave. He dies voluntarily and descends to the grave carrying a light, which signifies his spiritual insight.47 The red-haired dervish, as if a testifier to the eternal marriage, sits at the headstone and closes the grave behind them. In this instance, the representation of the woman as a reflection of spirituality is an inversion of Zahra’s representation. Hussein differs from Osman in that his spirituality is advanced. He does not need to be forced into the mystical by a sudden vision because his spirituality allows him to invoke the mystical beloved to accompany him in the profane.

This positive representation of the feminine in the film runs parallel to the, albeit minimal, negative representation. The feminising of worldly nafs, or “lower soul” (Schimmel 428), as related to the temptation of men at the hands of women is represented in the way the married woman betrays her husband and tempts Osman. She invites him into her house and asks him to read her passionate verses, originally written by Rumi:

I embrace her and yet still desire her

How can we be closer than an embrace?

I kiss her lips to calm my desire

But the thirst I suffer increases

Osman’s will is tested by this temptation and he seems to almost give in to the woman’s attempt. He is forced to escape by the arrival of her husband, who is alarmed by the sight of the open front door of the house. As Osman escapes from the back of the house, he passes through deserted ruins annexed to it. Strikingly, the house is not secured by a back

47 Papan-Matin explains that the constant appearance of the carried lights is a representation of the divine light made available to humans (118).
door but opens to the ruins as if adapted from architectural descriptions in The Thousand and One Nights. The ruins represent an exclusively feminine mystical space. By retreating to this space, Osman is saved and experiences a sudden crossing to the mystical. The fate of the married woman is never shown. Her disappearance from the story differs from that of Noor and Zahra, both of whom are theophanies representing the divine dhat. The married woman’s story remains in the margins as a distraction for Osman, who, able to avoid her, replaces nafs with divine love.

Following Sufi conventions for women makes Khemir’s representation less flexible. Khemir’s characterisation of women is marked by a strict adherence to typological Sufi perspectives of them, which may have reduced his creativity. Aside from young Ishtar, female characters remain flat. Their spiritual situation is only manifest in relation to the effect they have on men’s spirituality. Their spiritual experiences remain discrete at best. The female dervishes who travel alongside Bab’Aziz and the other female characters are not given an opportunity to narrate their stories. The patriarchal orientation of the film renders men articulate and influential in the mystical journey.

The theophanic representation of women plays a key role in Khemir’s political cause against radicalism. As a pagan method of representing God, it prevents radicals from exclusively owning the legitimising voice of the divine. For Khemir, spiritual insight permits individualistic ways of approaching the divine. The film starts with the Sufi statement that “there are as many paths which lead to God as there are men on earth.” These paths unfold in the narratives of the travellers who pursue the divine and in the various ways they arrive. The heterogeneity of paths, and the need to communicate their love of the divine, creates a vibrant artistic community of dancers, musicians, poets, calligraphers and storytellers. This community echoes the rich social structure of the historical Islamic civilisations.

Moreover, the representation of theophany challenges scriptural tenets that tend to reject such representation as blasphemy. Khemir attempts to liberate the way the divine is perceived or approached from any restrictions placed on it. Furthermore, the theophanic representation spiritualises the human bond and disavows the violence and aggression attributed to Islam by Western media, specifically post-9/11. Wahdat al-wujud asserts the transcendence of definitions of race and nationality. Khemir’s perspective of spirituality resists the reduction of Islam to a single culture or ideology. The film’s cast comprises a diverse set of actors. The film also communicates its messages in Farsi, Arabic and Hindi. As the previously discussed interview conducted by Khemais Khayati (1995) shows,
Khemir perceives the human component of Islamic civilisation to have originated from various non-Islamic cultures (257).

Khemir’s overwhelming affiliation with and longing for the past may permit the accusation that he holds an idealised picture of the past. World politics tend to identify the longing for a unified Islamic caliphate with terrorism as this desire is often utilised to recruit individuals to conduct acts of terror. Therefore, the idealisation of the social tolerance of past Islamic civilisation may fail to accomplish the goal of disavowing terrorist acts. Furthermore, Ibn ‘Arabi’s Sufism, specifically its notions of the divine theophany and its unrestrained ideological perspectives, was refused within the social context that Khemir celebrates as tolerant. Such a problematic treatment of the past could have been prevented if more developed characterisation were provided. For example, the characterisation of Hassan and Hussein in Bab’Aziz, who seem to resonate with Prophet Muhammed’s grandchildren of the same names, could have been more indicative of the history of Hussein’s murder and the permanent dispute this event inspired between Sunni and Shi’a Islam. Historically speaking, the murder of Hussein caused a division within the Islamic nation that had an enormous impact on tolerisation of difference and caused sectarian violence within past Islamic civilisations.

Regarding the second dimension of the human role as a corporeal resource of spiritual insight, the film’s portrayal of the kathak dance shows Sufism’s openness to external mystical practices. This ritual does not differ from the Sufi whirling captured at the beginning of the film as the red-haired dervish practices the Sufi samƗ’. He dances in a circular movement to the rhythm of the opening music joined with recitation of Qur’anic verses.48 On both occasions, the dances reflect the dancers’ spiritual insights, which they share with their audience through the dance. The performance of this ritual is utilised as a manifestation of the way the text can be embodied in human practice. The ritual is not an ignorant practice but a way of nurturing knowledge. The kathak dancers’ attempt to “tell a story” is visualised through the details of the dancers’ costumes and movements (Papan-Matin 119). The performance of these dances shows the high level of discipline such a practice involves.

Moreover, the visual elements of the film employ strategic use of lights to represent “the light of the heart” and the collective shared light of the divine, which individuals

48 These verses are “God exalted Adam and Noah, Abraham’s descendants and the descendants of ‘ImrƗn above the nations. They were the offspring of one another. God hears all and knows all. Remember the words of ‘ImrƗn’s wife. ‘Lord,’ she said, ‘I dedicated to You that which is in my womb. Accept it from me; You alone hear all and know all’” (3:33, 34, 35).
attempt to approach via their human bond. The representation of light extends beyond aesthetic festivity to a visualisation of the Qur’anic image of the divine light in both the individual and the collective. The use of light to connote spiritual insight is specifically evident in a scene in which Hussein walks with his twin Hassan in a town decorated with colourful lights. In this scene, Hussein’s request that his twin become his death witness proves to be made in vain. Hussein the Sufi mystic and Hassan who has “never set a foot in a mosque” are “as different as the two sides of a mirror”: Only one reflects light. However, their bond of brotherhood transforms Hassan into a Sufi. Hassan is angered by the fact that the red-haired dervish agrees to accompany Hussein to his grave as a witness. The presence of a witness is presented as a necessary requirement for both Bab’Aziz and Hussein’s “voluntary deaths.” The two dervishes advance to their deaths willingly because this is not their first death: They have already experienced the first fana, or the death of the ego. Literal death, then, is understood as a second death, the death of the body. Hassan views this as the murder of his brother and insists on taking revenge, joining the travelling crowds in the desert. He is taught divine love by the red-haired dervish and by Bab’Aziz through storytelling. After Bab’Aziz’s death, Hassan assumes Bab’Aziz’s clothes (as his own clothes were previously stolen) and embarks on his own journey. His spiritual journey is initiated by grief and anger, unlike other travellers. However, he is contained, healed and guided by other dervishes. In Hassan’s story, light is akin to compassion and is inherited and shared. His heart, the darker side of the mirror, receives the light that shines from other dervishes. The implication then is that spirituality can be acquired from external factors or agents through human interaction.

Another representation of light is captured in the poetic circle in which Zaïd first meets Noor. Both in the centre of the poets’ circle and in the background, circular trays containing countless small candles are present. In this scene, each candle shines a light that contributes to a collective circular light. The visible circular light of the candles is surrounded by the invisible lights of the poets’ hearts. The presentation uniquely permits one circle of light to encompass the other and seems to be a visualisation of a Qur’anic

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In The Meccan Revelations (vol. 1), Ibn ‘Arabi wrote on the “voluntary death,” explaining that death is the certain fate of all human beings, but mystics, because of their love of the divine and their longing for him, seek a sooner death, or fana, in the worldly life and will not be affected by the death of the body. Such a mystic “does not even feel the inevitable, compulsory return [of physical] death, because it only comes to him when he is already there with God. The most that what is [ordinarily] known as death can mean for him is that his soul, which is with God, is kept from governing this body that it used to govern. . . that body reverts to its origin, the dust from which it was formed” (105-6).
verse widely celebrated by Sufi scholars as well as Sufi literary works, namely, the Light Verse.

Noor’s position at the head of the circle further enriches the composition of light by the multiple lights she embodies: her name, her internal individual light and the light of the divine she reflects as theophany. Zaïd’s recitation of Rumi’s poem in this scene is significant, as it relates the composition of light in the circle to the universal dimensions of the divine light stated in the Qur’anic verse. In this poem, Rumi implores the sun to shine over the ecstatic universe where the “atoms” are perpetually travelling towards the divine. The poem likens the poets in the circle as well as the crowds of dervishes to the “atoms” dancing and journeying with ecstasy.

Noor’s central position as well as her claim that her father wrote the poem places her at the core of the artistic representation of the Qur’anic verse. Papan-Matin identifies a relationship between the character of Noor and the verse because she “represents an occasion to experience the light of God in the world of creation by means of zeal for love and yearning” (118). Noor’s reflection of light, Papan-Matin says, qualifies her to be an echo of Rumi’s beloved Shams Tabrizi (1185-1248), whose name literally means “sun” and who disappeared from Rumi’s life suddenly in the same way Noor vanishes from Zaïd’s sight (117-8). Above all, Noor’s claim that her father is Rumi emphasises that the character is an archetypal image that does not abide by the rules of time and space. She represents the pole, or quṭūb, of the film’s spiritual universe. She is the central point of the spiritual flux, the sun of Rumi’s poem around which the poets and dervishes circle in their search for the divine.

Noor’s appearance at the gathering in the desert, dressed in a white kurta and white turban and singing Rumi’s poem, is devoid of any gendered, cultural, temporal or spatial specificity to further enhance her significance. Zaïd and Ishtar wander among the performing Sufi bands calling “Noor! Noor!” in an articulation of approaching the spiritual destination. She is found standing in the middle of a circular deck surrounded once again by torches. Zaïd’s reunion with Noor is shown in a sequence of shots that capture the lovers’ mutual glances. This scene shows light shining on the faces of Zaïd and Ishtar, logically stemming from the torches but symbolically coming from the sun, Noor. Ishtar’s momentary smile is replaced with a brief earnest expression, as if she is receiving her own

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50 Papan-Matin also refers to this light in relation to the characterisation of Noor. The verse (24:35) was mentioned in full earlier in the chapter.

51 Quṭūb, a Sufi motif theorised by Ibn ‘Arabi and explained by Schimmel as “the virtual centre of spiritual energy upon whom the well-being of this world depends” (200).
spiritual call. She is a dervish in the making whose accomplishment of the journey, unlike other dervishes, does not suggest a termination of the search.

Towards the end of the film, the dervishes’ gathering is captured in a wide shot with the wandering dervishes and their lanterns creating sparkles of lights surrounded by mysterious darkness. In this scene, the dervishes, still on the move and wandering among the Sufi performances, holding their lanterns, are like the desert poets who have just arrived at their beloved’s encampment. Their searching journey, or rahil, is completed. Similarly, Khemir’s elegy of the decayed civilisation has ended, as he has been able to bring to life the inhabitants of the past Islamic civilisation. Those inhabitants sing in Arabic, apart from Noor, who sings Rumi’s poem in Farsi. These songs exhibit the wide array of the races and cultures that utilised these languages to communicate their spiritual quests.

7. Conclusion:

Khemir’s Bab’Aziz poetically summarises the contemporary struggles of postcolonial individuals. National boundaries have introduced new definitions of the individual, which can be based on gender, race or religion. Borders are, for Khemir, a tool that dismantles the individual and the nation. Their advent fashioned a postcolonial world that is completely detached from its precolonial past. Khemir attempts to portray, as in Osman’s attempt at migration, postcolonial individuals as lost and forgetful of their past. This, for Khemir, can only be abolished by achieving adequate knowledge of the self and fulfilling internal insight.

Khemir’s notion of internal insight can be understood as a political rejection of radicalised religious discourse. That is, Khemir’s representation of internal insight as an individualistic manner of approaching the divine contests terrorist ideologies. Enhancing individuals’ perspective of their religious quest based on their knowledge of themselves does not leave space for fundamentalism. The search for the gathering revives the dervishes’ knowledge of themselves just like the need for water or the need to find the lost beloved urges the Bedouin or the poet to recognise a trace or a memory.

Khemir’s rejection of aggression does not only involve violence committed in the name of religion; it views the materialistic greed of modernity as an equal form of violence. Khemir does not attempt to rationalise his stance through pro-nature dialectics but relies on mysticism to combat materialism. The heavenly goat that saved Ismail is similar to the gazelle that introduces the Prince, or Bab’Aziz, to Sufism. Their direct access to the mystical qualifies them to be spiritual agents in Khemir’s desert.
In this desert, spirituality allows the human to embody the divine or the divine text, transcending all manmade boundaries and restrictions. Spiritual connection overcomes postcolonial borders. The gathering of the dervishes reflects the cosmopolitanism of the Islamic civilisation in which a certain ritual may transcend its immediate discourse and be adapted into a universal practice. The kathak, \textit{samā’} and Rumi’s poem are all glimpses of the way Sufism fuses and merges all of these practices. In this regard, cosmopolitanism, including its ecological aspect, is asserted by Khemir as having a spiritual connotation and as rooted in the Islamic past.
Chapter 5: Religious Agency in Raja Alem’s Novels

1. Introduction:

In Raja Alem’s novels, feminist discourse is interconnected with the epistemological discourse. She utilises Sufism’s endorsement of the elitism of knowledge to contest patriarchal hierarchy over religious text and its interpretation both by Wahhabi ‘ulama\(^{52}\) and within Sufi society.

To contest this hierarchy, Alem asserts that women are more qualified to spirituality and intuitional knowledge than men. In her Arabic novel Sitr (2005), or “veil,” she states that “Adam, the man, is created of mud, a cold, dead and dense material, whereas Eve, the woman, is created of Adam’s rib, an alive material of flesh, blood and [heart] beats. Their response to love is, therefore, different. The response of flesh and blood is different from that of mud” (39).\(^{53}\) The capacity for love is associated with spirituality because love, for Alem, tends to be a spiritual state derived from divine love. Spiritual knowledge is, Alem claims, a feminine property, and it is the source of women’s agency. The prophetic tradition to which this statement alludes is mostly utilised to undermine women as being intellectually and religiously lacking. Relying on her perspective of the elitism of knowledge, Alem highlights misogynist notions derived from common social and religious conceptions and urges a process of rethinking by restating or actualising these conceptions. The discussion of Alem’s two novels shows how she utilises this strategy in her endeavour to counter patriarchal hierarchy.

In My Thousand and One Nights (2007), [henceforth My Thousand], Alem offers two examples of women’s mystical experiences. The first is depicted in the life of Jummo, whose mystical experience steers out of the control of the matriarchs and patriarchs of the family; her experience appears at first to be a form of agentive resistance but eventually becomes hugely destructive to the character and her agency. The second example is depicted in the character of Hamida Khaja, whose profound spiritual knowledge represents Alem’s view of the ideal agentive spirituality. The study of the two protagonists’ mystical experience reveals the negative impact of the social manipulation of the mystical. In Jummo’s experience, the mystical is a social commodity dominated, as in patriarchal

\(^{52}\) The term Wahhabism is used in this thesis regardless of the hugely controversial arguments around its origin and whether it is accepted by the followers of Mohammed ibn-Abdul Wahhab (1703-1792). The discussion of such terminology is beyond the scope of this research.

\(^{53}\) The translation is mine. Alem refers to the story of human creation in Heaven as narrated in Islamic traditions, such as by the prophetic Hadith: “Woman has been created from [Adam’s] rib and will in no way be straightened for you” (16:3467).
society, by a gendered hierarchy. The study of the novel examines the narrative of the two characters’ paths to agency and the implied feminist paradigm of resistance.

In Fatma (2002), the extremely oppressed and semiliterate titular protagonist finds agency through meditation and masters a form of spiritual reading that provides her with an informed spirituality, leading eventually to her agency. This study of the novel attempts to discuss Alem’s view of the contribution of the two realms, the mystical and the profane, to the protagonist’s agency. The study of My Thousand will be conducted first to establish an understanding of Alem’s feminist position. This allows the discussion to flow from the specific context of Sufi society and the attributes of social assimilation to the wider context, depicted in Fatma, of the host culture, the “culture of the centre” as Alem calls it (qtd. in Arebi 114).

Before undertaking a study of the novels, it is necessary to examine the manner in which Alem’s novels have been translated into English. Alem’s cooperation with Tom McDonough, an American cinematographer who states that he does not have any knowledge of Arabic language and literature (McDonough, Afterword to Fatma 157 and Introduction to My Thousand viii), necessitates a reflection on the level of his contribution to the novels.

2. The Issue of Translation:

Alem wrote eight novels in Arabic, two of which have been translated into English: My Thousand and The Dove’s Necklace, or Tawq al-hamam (2011, translated into English in 2016) [henceforth The Dove’s]. Fatma is her only novel not published in Arabic. McDonough assisted in the “translation” of Fatma, to use his word, from Alem’s English manuscript (McDonough afterword to Fatma 155) and the translation of My Thousand from the Arabic original, Sidi Wahdana, literally Sir Death (Introduction to My Thousand xiv). Alem’s latest novel, The Dove’s, was translated as a winner of the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF) in 2011, a prize that covers the costs of translating the winning texts into English. The translation of this book was conducted by Kathrine Halls and Adam Talib, whose subtle choice of vocabulary, as well as the latter’s competence in classical Arabic, preserve the complex Sufi sense of the novel.

In contrast, when he started working on Alem’s novels, McDonough’s experience with Arabic literature had been, as he states in his afterword to Fatma, confined to One Thousand and One Nights (157). He explains in the same afterword that he struggled to perceive Alem’s complex meanings and modest capacity to express herself in literary

34 Halls is an instructor in Arabic at the University of Oxford, and Talib is an assistant professor of classical Arabic literature at The American University in Cairo.
English (155). While reading Alem’s English manuscript of their first attempted novel, Haza Haza Haza, he continues, he embarked upon a process of “paraphrasing” due to what he calls “stylistic considerations,” but he asserts that his draft of the text was sent to Alem for approval or further clarifications (155).

McDonough makes it clear that at the beginning of their collaborative work he believed that his mission was to “rescue” Alem (afterword to Fatma 164). However, as they proceeded with the joint work, he realised that Alem “doesn’t need rescuing” (164). Ironically, despite this realisation and the claim that he attempted to “speak with” Alem, a few years after the publication of Fatma, McDonough writes in his introduction to My Thousand that he altered some of Alem’s content: “I glossed over Raja’s ‘praising the Mighty Creator or King of the Kings.’ I can’t remember my reasons for doing so” (xii). This change was undertaken under the umbrella of cultural translation, or to use McDonough’s words, “moving [Raja’s] vision transparently from one culture to another” (xii). The secularisation attempt is noticeable on another occasion, where the Qur’anic verse “do as you are bidden” that Jummo hears in a vision is omitted in the translation (146 Arabic, 186 English).

McDonough’s preliminary reflection on saving Alem may have led him to practice this secularisation. Alem’s dense writing resulting from the religious content and frequent reference to local conventions and religious historical events seems to pose challenges to a Western readership. McDonough’s omission of the religious materials can be perceived within this context as an attempt at facilitating the accessibility of the narrative. Alem’s narrative centralises the sacred, deploying public and private spaces in its margins. In fact, the sacred permeates these spaces, turning them into one elusive sphere in which there is no boundary between the mystical and the profane. While the “otherness” of such a text is hard to overcome in the process of translation, McDonough’s cultural translation aims at bridging the gap by occasional elimination of religious references.

However, as his statement makes clear, McDonough himself may have struggled with the “otherness” of Alem’s texts. Despite his active role in the production of the novel, McDonough may represent, to some extent, the struggle of the Western reader and critic to perceive the mysticism of Sufi novels. McDonough suggests that reading Alem’s writing on the mystical is similar to interpreting Mayan graphics in the sense that, despite their apparent complexity and the Western “bias for linear literacy and compartmentalized sign-system,” they do not require a complicated process of decoding (158). As he explains, they “meant simply what they said” (158). McDonough’s explanation could be another example
of the way postcolonial religious vocalisation creates a challenge for Western scholars due
to the way modern Western intellectual fields are standardised on a secular basis.55

Miriam Cooke, for instance, introduces Alem in her chapter “Dying to Be Free: Wilderness Writing from Lebanon, Arabia, and Libya” (2007) as “a writer who has been consistently fascinated by the occult and the bizarre” (17). Describing Alem’s Sufi discourse in such terms poses questions related to the manner in which Alem’s literary writing of the mystical is approached. Terms like “occult” and “bizarre” seem to lack an understanding of Alem’s relation to the mystical as expressed in her novels. Alem does not seem to perceive the mystical as a form of magic in the sense that it is less real than the profane. McDonough writes in the afterword to Fatma that Alem “accepts The Invisible as a fact, as another form of life, not fantastical but subtly veiled” (159). He describes the novels as “[a] message in a bottle, the finding of it more disquieting than the message” (158). Alem’s novels are “disquieting” in terms of the challenge they pose to readers. The inaccessibility of Alem’s novels is not solely caused by the secularism of the reception but is also due to Alem’s belief in the elitism of knowledge, which leads her to adopt a complex style.

McDonough does not seem to have adequate cultural and ideological resources to

gain access to Alem’s complex narrative and Sufi background. Alem’s reference to qurra’ arrouh, or soul readers (individuals who assume the ability to make contact with the dead), is translated to “spiritualists” (254). The latter is a term that reflects a subtle prejudice in viewing spirituality, associating it with what is perceived as superstitious practices of contacting the dead. This association is at odds with Alem’s central endeavour to assert Sufism as a knowledge-based ideology.

McDonough’s attempt to secularise Alem’s My Thousand may remind the reader of the way the original text of One Thousand and One Nights has been rewritten to satisfy Western taste. As Muhsin Jassim Al-Musawi explains in his book The Postcolonial Arabic Novel: Debating Ambivalence (2003), the translation of One Thousand and One Nights, which aimed to fulfil the increasing European interest in the literature of the colonised East, required a significant amount of appropriation (71-3). However, whereas medieval stories require rewriting due to potential vulgarity that may not suit the targeted “elitist” readership (73), Alem’s novel, despite the ownership and dissent the pronoun “My” may suggest, is subjected to a process of simplification. Alem’s selection of the Hijazi56 vernacular and classical Arabic channels a unique sense of the locality of her narrative.

The original text of My Thousand is particularly complex and rich. The translation does not

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55 This issue is discussed chapter 1 in reference to Hollywood and Chakrabarty.
56 Hijaz is the Western region of Arabia.
attempt to extract this novel from its local context; however, due to the challenges of translating such a linguistic mixture, the resultant English text at times becomes an interpretation rather than a translation of the intended complex meanings.

The representation of women in My Thousand is affected by the process of translation. Alem’s affiliation with Ibn ‘Arabi’s Sufism renders her articulation of the Sufi experience saturated with erotic mysticism, similar to prominent testimonial accounts of the Christian female mysticism of the Middle Ages, such as that of Catharine of Genoa (1447-1510). The feminist dimension of this representation will be discussed in due course, but the manner of Alem’s attempt to depict this eroticism appears, in the translation, to make the women of the novel fit Orientalist imaginings of Muslim and Middle Eastern women. The translation emphasises this eroticism, and a recapturing of the scenes for the Orientalist imagination is exemplified by the selection of the English version’s title. The new title excites certain expectations regarding women’s image as sensual. The erotic scenes with which the novel starts and which are scattered throughout the novel are adapted from a narrative heavy with ideological and social significance into a ready verification of the Orientalist image. An example of this can be noted in the first scene of the novel: The translation witnesses the addition of the following sentences describing Jummo’s body: “She inhales. She exhales. Her stomach stays flat. She’s sweating with the effort of trying to see her body whole and clear. Her reflection feels offended. Her nipples look innocently upward” (1). Despite the fact that this addition does not alter the meaning of the text, it serves to assimilate Jummo’s bodily experience to that of the Orientalist image of sexualised Oriental women. It superficially associates the Sufi female protagonists and their mystical experiences with ready Orientalist images derived from One Thousand and One Nights.

Overall, the process of cultural translation conducted by Alem and McDonough is complicated by many factors. McDonough’s efforts seem to be focused on making the novels publishable and culturally accessible. This may imply an attempt to secularise some of the content despite the apparent Sufi features of the novels that are not amenable to such secularisation. McDonough performs the role of the cultural translator in close interaction with Alem, which makes it hard to assume that the alterations are always made by one or the other—in particular, because Alem maintains an access to both languages. Furthermore, whereas McDonough continues to speak about the process of translation in the introduction and afterword to the two texts, Alem’s motivation behind approving such alterations is left unexplained. In an interview with James Strecker entitled “Saudi Author Raja Alem: An Interview & a Review” (2013), Alem was asked about the difficulties she faced when writing in English. She answered: “Not knowing how I sound. And the fact
that I can’t give the equal flavor to Arabic jargon words, tastes, beliefs . . . and I am afraid that in English I might sound medieval in style” (5). The barrier separating Alem from her translated texts seems to be both cultural and linguistic. This may have compelled her to approve the aforementioned changes as contributing to the cultural translation, specifically because she seems to have compromised her complex literary language in the Arabic original for this reason. The elitist mystical expression along with localised context may lead to a minimal readership, which may justify publishers’ rejection of the first collaborative work by Alem and McDonough, Haza Haza Haza, which McDonough describes as “a romantic adventure set in seventeenth-century Mecca” (Introduction to My Thousand ix). Whilst they remain subtle, such alterations may disturb the sense of the text’s Sufi originality in favour of the secular one.

Although a similar comparison is not possible for Fatma because it is written in English, Fatma exhibits a more eloquent articulation of the mystical experience. This may be attributed to the freedom both Alem and McDonough enjoyed in the absence of an original Arabic text. This novel is written to address Western readers. Furthermore, the majority of the narrative takes place in Fatma’s marital house, thus eliminating the tricky presence of a mystical public space. The privacy of the protagonist’s confinement permits the text to appear, as Cooke’s article reads it, as an expression aligned with magical realism. Therefore, Fatma’s thematic structure does not exhibit the same challenges posed by My Thousand. The study of My Thousand in this chapter is conducted with close examination of both the Arabic and English versions of the text.

3. The Mystical as a social commodity in My Thousand:

My Thousand is a fictionalised biographical novel based on the story of Raja Alem’s maternal ancestors, with a particular focus on the story of Jummo, her aunt. The narrative takes place in Mecca and Taif, where the family lived during the early twentieth century. The family consists of the traditionally married couple, Alem’s maternal grandparents: Mohammed al-Baikwaly, “Sheik of the Zamzam water carriers” (62), and his wife Nara. Nara is a sharp, energetic and conservative woman whose real name was lost when she migrated from Uzbekistan, foreshadowing complications regarding women’s names among patriarchs. She therefore was nicknamed Nara, meaning “small fire” (10). The couple have three daughters. Hannah is the eldest, a spirited, passionate and serene girl who was married at a young age to Mohammed al-Maghrabi, who loves her devotedly. Hannah has three miscarriages and two children who die in infancy. She is left with three daughters: Zohr, the narrator of the story, Krazat Al-Yosir and Joman, as well as a son, Nabee Jan (84). Jummo, the second daughter of Mohammed al-Baikwaly and Nara, is an energetic
and rebellious girl whose passionate relationship with Sidi Wahdana, a mystical spirit character, and Mayjan, a Khazar boy who drowned in the Zamzam well on Jummo’s wedding day (13), forms the unifying thread of the narrative. Lastly, Zubayda, the youngest daughter, is named after a well-known spring in Mecca (243).

The novel opens with the narrator, Zohr, finding the trinket that is Hannah’s sole inheritance from her younger sister, Jummo, after her death (My Thousand 3). Upon opening the trinket, they find Jummo’s story written in henna dye on pages ripped from the book of One Thousand and One Nights (3). Reading the pages, Zohr witnesses the materialisation of Hassan Al-Basri, a goldsmith from the tales of the One Thousand and One Nights (4). The narrator befriends al-Basri and starts telling him Jummo’s story in a way that resists a chronological reading, with overlapping corporeal and mystical episodes.

As previously discussed, Sufi views of women revolve around two fundamental aspects: They see women either as theophanies of the divine dhat, or as a reflection of the “lower soul” in the sense that they create a spiritual challenge for men by inspiring their lust (Schimmel 428). Alem’s novel narrates the life of Jummo and her struggle for a unification with the mystical, depicting the social impact of this struggle on Jummo’s spirituality and the way Jummo’s uninformed spiritual experience develops into destructive adventures packed with eroticism. The novel also depicts, albeit at a shorter length and with less detail, the life and spirituality of a Khazar woman called Hamida Khaja, whose spiritual knowledge qualifies her to reach beyond social and ideological hierarchies. A discussion of the mystical experience of both characters, as well as their social situations, may assist in establishing Alem’s view of women’s religious agency.

Alem’s novel highlights the manner in which mysticism and the religious agency derived from it can be affected by social restrictions. For Alem, patriarchal and matriarchal interference in women’s mysticism clashes with her convictions regarding internal and individualistic knowledge. The hierarchy of the patriarchs and matriarchs is represented in the novel as posing many challenges to Sufi women’s mysticism. For Alem, identifying and contesting such authority is crucial to women’s mysticism. Whereas in Fatma this authority is attributed to the religious ideology of Wahhabi ‘ulama, in My Thousand it is blamed on the social structure. Both forms of authority are perceived by Alem as benefiting from collective moral responsibility and are rejected as exerting a negative influence on women’s spiritual insight. The study of My Thousand is conducted first in order to establish an understanding of Alem’s feminist position. The patriarchal structure

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57 This refers to the canal built by Harun Al-Rashid’s wife, Zubayda bint Ja’far ibn Mansur (died 831 CE). The novel briefly refers to this history (21).
and its ideological background, promoted by the Wahhabi 'ulaam, will be discussed in relation to Fatma.

The social structure of Hijaz is complex. As Aziza Al-Essa explains in her article “When Najd Meets Hijaz: Dialect Contact in Jeddah” (2009), the population of Hijaz varies between indigenous, mostly non-tribal inhabitants and a mixture of Asian and Arab migrants, the majority of whom are from countries such as Egypt, Morocco, Syria, Indonesia, and India as well as others from Najd, Yemen and Hadramwt (Al-Essa 204). Having migrated for economic and religious reasons, they prefer to live in the urban cities of Hijaz (205). Even though their ancestors may belong to other countries outside Arabia, the population of Hijaz may refer to themselves as ahl-al-balad to differentiate themselves from the Bedouins, who live near the Hijazi cities, and from recently immigrated people (205).

Mai Yamani explains in Cradle of Islam: The Hijaz and The Quest for an Arabian Identity (2009) that due to powerful cultural contact with the Bedouins of Arabia through the unification of Hijaz and Najd, the Hijazis’ perspectives of the social position of the ‘awa’il (literally “families”) corresponds to that of the Najdi tribes (Yamani 26). According to the tribal perspective, the deeds of individuals can affect the honour of the whole family (26). Due to the dynamism of the social ladder, a family can move upward financially or socially as a result of the prominent achievements of individual members (26). The opposite is, of course, true as well, and a family can fall due to the “bad actions” of a family member. Therefore, female honour, which is assigned great importance in the Najdi tribes, has become crucial to the honour of some Hijazi ‘awa’il (26). The novel depicts the diversity of the social structure and its impact on women. The families, or ‘awa’il, described in the novel take their place of origin as a surname, such as the Khazar, to whom the narrator’s family belongs, the Istanbuli, the Moroccans and the Yemenites.

The novel represents the powerful social patriarchy that tends to be acquired via assimilation. Observing social codes is key to the family’s honour. The narrator describes the illogical fears the patriarchal society exhibits towards the feminine body: “According to Nara, a girl could get pregnant just by being looked at. She could get pregnant if a bird pooped on her shadow, or if her scent got tangled in a rope swaying in the breeze” (221). The fear of dishonour dictates social attention towards women. Because unmarried girls’ pregnancy is seen as a dismal scandal, Nara’s obsession with honour leads her to prevent her daughters from any form of public appearance.

This social obsession with honour leads to obscuring women’s identity. The narrator explains that Meccan women are known only by their family names: “Sindiah, for example, was short for Fatma Sindi” (5). This effort to conceal women’s names is deeply
connected with gender seclusion, assigning men to the public sphere and women to the domestic sphere. Jummo says: “Your name is the key to your soul . . . if you know the name, you have a legal right to the whole body” (23). Social popularity for women, therefore, is perceived as leading to exposure and risking intimacy. Hannah’s marriage is an occasion where such a perspective manifests itself: The marriage ceremony is conducted without using her name, which is hidden like herself, as she “was kept shrouded in veils of suspense to all inquiries, no matter how diplomatic or oblique” because the anonymity of the bride supports her family’s social position (27). Such conventions are true of the social situation of Mecca in the twentieth century where, according to Yamani (2004), women hide their names behind hierarchical codes of family, which thus become the woman’s sole identifier (Yamani, Cradle of Islam 26). Yamani explains that “using the first name implies exposing her personal identity to male strangers and endangering their honour through familiarity” (26). The concept of veiling is expanded by the patriarchs and utilised permanently to domesticate women.

This situation, as the novel depicts, influences the manner in which society views female mysticism. As a public affair that tends to occupy a great amount of attention and conversation, the mystical shares many features with the public space of the patriarchal society: Both are seen as dominated by male presence and involving various risks for women. As the discussion of Alem’s My Thousand attempts to examine the influence of such a context on Alem’s protagonists’ agency, it addresses the process of internalising the patriarchal perspective of the mystical as gendered.

In her article “Feminists, Philosophers, and Mystics” (1994), Grace Jantzen argues that internal spiritual knowledge, which she attributes to Platonic philosophy, requires transcending the body (188). She explains that mysticism associated with this conviction asserts that religious scripture is “ineffable” and that its readings require “shutting all the senses” (188 [emphasis in original]). This reading is opposed to the literal one favoured by less enlightened readers or scholars (188). However, Jantzen continues, this mysticism is complicated by a gendered view of knowledge. She explains that “Plato and all in his train took for granted that women were identified with bodiliness and that knowledge, especially in its highest forms, was the prerogative of men” (188). The influence of such views on the medieval monastery, she continues, led female mystics to claim authority over spiritual knowledge by their visions (189). This led to the formation of two rivals: the male scriptural-based and female vision-based spiritual authorities (189). This duality is examined by Carol P. Christ in “Embodied Embedded Mysticism: Affirming the Self and Others in a Radically Interdependent World” (2008) as creating polarised constitutions in Western theology: “transcendence and immanence, mind and body, rational and irrational,
male and female” (160). Under the title “The Brides of God” Annemarie Schimmel (2003) explains how Rumi utilised gendered images to depict the mystic’s longing for the divine, personifying the soul as a feminine lover awaiting union with her beloved (109). The echo of this image has already been seen in Khemir’s film, equating the mystic’s death with marriage. The passivity of the feminine and deference to the masculine, seen as a norm in such a gendered context, is thus associated with the passivity of the soul to the divine (Schimmel 107). Gender becomes an earthly way of capturing, interpreting and describing mystical experience. However, as an examination of Alem’s novels makes clear, patriarchal views of gender that associate the feminine with negative attributes are projected onto the articulation of mystical experience. Tracing the impact of this gendered duality on perceptions of mysticism is necessary to achieve a sound understanding of women’s agency in Alem’s My Thousand.

A feminist critique of such rhetoric tackles the reductive position in which the feminine is situated. In the course of marginalising the body in relation to the spirit, this duality marginalises the feminine in relation to the masculine (Finke 403), which feeds the classical gendered struggle for power. In The Second Sex (1952, 1993), Simone de Beauvoir argues that man identifies himself as “an absolute human type” from which woman is derived as his “Other” (xli-xlv). From such a perspective, the masculine or feminine body is defined: “He thinks of his body as a direct and normal connection with the world, which he believes he apprehends objectively, whereas he regards the body of woman a hindrance, a prison, weighed down by everything peculiar to it” (xlv). Such identification forms the basis, de Beauvoir argues, of the formation of women’s self-perception, which in turn shapes women’s mystical experiences.

De Beauvoir’s scepticism regarding agentic mysticism lies in the possibility that mysticism could originate from women’s attempts at self-justification (703). Therefore, mysticism becomes a form of “narcissism” that can be reduced to women’s attempt to see in the divine a “mirror” of themselves (708). One of the female mystics criticised by de Beauvoir is Madame Guyon (1648-1717), whose mysticism consists of her attempts to find recognition of herself in the mystical. Guyon, in her Autobiography of Madame Guyon (2011 [first published in the Netherlands in 1704]), says that “I loved without considering a motive or reason for loving. Nothing passed in my head, but much in the innermost recess of my soul... I knew nothing else, but to love and to suffer. Ignorance more truly learned than any science of the doctors” (36). Guyon’s detachment from reason and her desire to surrender her consciousness to the mystical without seeking an end reward serves as an example of what de Beauvoir views as the formation of female subjectivity via patriarchal society.
De Beauvoir therefore differentiates between active, self-empowered mystics who are in control of their mystical experience and consciousness and “narcissistic” others whose mysticism is a submission to a patriarchal cultural classification that sees in mysticism a subjective space appropriate for women (711). In her study of de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex, Amy Hollywood (2002) rephrases de Beauvoir’s scepticism, stating that

Even those women who seem to have transcended men’s positioning of them in the place of the other are in fact still living out the romantic fantasy assigned to them because of their sex. Women do not transcend their nature or their sex in the mystical; rather, the mystical is an extension of their gendered identity. (Sensible Ecstasy 127)

The gendered feminine identity has the effect of problematising mysticism. De Beauvoir explains that male mysticism does not face the same challenges because men are capable of transcending their subjectivity through other domains in the profane (661). Representing the original prototype of the human being, patriarchs do not restrict their self-justification to the acknowledgement of the body (661-2). Mystic women, therefore, can eschew the complications of gender by maintaining a connection with the world and utilising mystical insight to improve it (703). Being influential in a patriarchal society signifies that the female mystic is capable of reaching a transcendental position from which she can challenge gender hierarchy (708-9). Mysticism thus can help women achieve autonomy and subvert the identification of the feminine as the patriarchal “Other.” The autonomous mystical experience, for de Beauvoir, is productive in the practical sense. For her, the gendered duality of mysticism follows the gender pattern of the profane, and mysticism can result in agency only when it subverts this pattern.

Alem’s My Thousand depicts the ample influence of patriarchy and matriarchy on the conception of the mystical. Jummo is a subject of the socially formulated mystical space, which is personified in the spirit of Sidi Wahdana. This collective knowledge hinders women’s quest to realize their inner insights. It is also problematic due to its misogynist nature and its lack of a clear boundary separating social elements from mystical ones. For example, the narrative shows the way the Mayor identifies Sidi Wahdana: “Sidi has many faces, and all his faces are good omens. But beware the pupils of Sidi’s eyes! Stay away, if you can, stay clear of their blackness” (14). The spirit is classified as male by the Meccans and is granted the title Sidi, meaning “sir” or “master” (McDonough, Introduction to My Thousand xiv). The awe with which the spirit is described and the masculine indicators seem to accommodate each other in the male personification of the spirit: Spiritual hierarchy among the Meccans asserts the superiority of the male Sufi. The
spirit occupies the highest position on the spiritual pyramid of the Meccans, depicting the spirit as a divine figure.

Alem’s representation of such a statement by a public authority like the Mayor shows that the ideological influence is strategic and intentional, indicating a patriarchal and matriarchal authoritarian exploitation of the mystical to maintain what they see as the common good. In the Mayor’s articulation, Sidi Wahdana’s eyes are watching individuals’ private affairs. This, therefore, embeds the younger generation’s fear of transgressing social or religious norms, a fear further asserted by the name’s connotation of death. This perpetually present eye, which is an inversion of “the inner eye” (Fatma 67) that aids the Sufi’s spiritual insight, penetrates disguises that hide secrets or guilt and eradicates individual freedom, turning individual acts into a social affair. Alem repudiates the way the mystical is usurped by patriarchs and matriarchs to enact social norms. For Alem, this usurpation is only possible due to the perception of collective moral responsibility that legitimises this hierarchy. As an advocate of the individual quest for spiritual knowledge as a basis for agency, Alem sees the absence of boundaries between the social and religious as an impediment to women achieving agency. This entanglement is exacerbated by the gendered duality that assigns women to the body and the domestic.

In the society Alem depicts, women are perceived as presenting a potential threat to the collective welfare, which the Meccan patriarchs attempt to counter by restraining women’s access to knowledge, thus domesticating their profane and mystical experiences. The narrator confirms that “women were forbidden to enter the world of letters, with its secret doors and seductive powers. The first chapter of the Qur’an was as far as a woman . . . was permitted to go” (214). The patriarchs’ authority over textual traditions keeps women subject to patriarchal religious theorisations.

Alem shows the consequences of this ideological guardianship of Sufi women’s agency. Within such epistemological naivety, Jummo’s socially designed knowledge seems to form her impression of the mystical. To Jummo’s question, “Who are you, Sidi?”, Sidi Wahdana answers, “I am He—if you like. And if you don’t like, I’m not He” (96). Sidi Wahdana’s response suggests that mystical agents occupy the position in which the Sufis place them. Alem highlights the impossibility of determining a definite conception of the mystical and its spirits. Therefore, the supreme spiritual position granted to Sidi Wahdana, indicated by the capital in the pronoun “He,” is a matter of a subjective conviction produced by the Sufis. This is equally applicable to the gendering of the mystical spirits. The spirit’s answer, encouraging a sceptical rethinking of the masculine pronoun, may imply an assertion of the mystical neutrality of gender classifications. This perspective is highlighted in Fatma when the protagonist Fatma asks her spiritual teacher,
Noor, “What are you? Ginii or human?” To which Noor answers, “You keep trying to capture me, to understand me according to the cages people invent when they set limits on themselves. Man, woman. Old, young. Human, genii…” (42). The mystical is neither gendered nor hierarchical, but human beings perceive it as such. This false perception hinders women’s spirituality due to the power it provides to male-gendered spirits. Jummo’s mystical experience is marked by complete submission to the male spirit, a submission that reflects her perception of gender relations in the profane. Jummo’s passivity to the mystical hierarchy is entangled with her perception of the mystical experience as bodily and erotic.

In a cyclical way, patriarchal fear of the feminine body leads to the formation of the second part of the duality, which essentialises the body as the sole conduit of women’s mystical experience. In this regard, Jummo’s erotic mysticism shows a degree of compliance with medieval motifs of erotic mystical experience. An example of such a motif is what Julie B. Miller, in “Eroticized Violence in Medieval Women's Mystical Literature: A Call for a Feminist Critique” (1999), coined as “piercing and penetration,” popular in the writings of female mystics from the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries (32-3). These mystics wrote that the soul is assaulted by the “arrow” of divine love (33), a motif utilised by female mystics to channel the feelings of “joy” and “pain” caused by the mystical encounter (33).58 Alem’s allusion to this motif in depicting Jummo’s erotic experience complicates the way the feminine body is involved in the mystical experience. Her depiction functions as an interrogation of social traditions that assert virginity as the sole identifier of honour and the way this assertion challenges girls’ agency due to various patriarchal precautions. For instance, Jummo’s encounter with the Ram in a sexual vision serves as an important indication of the way Alem perceives virginity to be a false standard of honour.

The narrator details the vision that takes place on the morning of Jummo’s wedding to al-Neyabi. Jummo’s husband leaves the house that morning disappointed by his failed attempts to approach her sexually (176). Mayjan, dead at the time, materialises on Jummo’s doorstep and asks her to join him for a walk. The walk, which takes the pair through the male-only bird market, is marked by extraordinary events. Jummo sees a corpse transform into a green bird and lead a flying flock of deceased people towards Mount Mercy in Arafat (182-3). The bird carries Jummo on its wing to a cave where she meets the Ram (184). The Ram asks Jummo for “the bundle of blood,” referring to

58 For instance, Catherine of Genoa explains her erotic experience: “[God] sent her a ray of His love so burning and deep that it was an agony to sustain. Issuing from the fountain of Christ that love, wounding the soul, stripped it of all other loves. . . God deeply impressed upon her the fountains of Christ with their fiery bloody drops of love for [humanity]” (qtd. in Miller 33).
Jummo’s wedding sheets prepared by Nara and embroidered with eyes to witness and absorb the blood of Jummo’s lost virginity (186). Alem refers to the tradition of observing the bride’s virginity blood as proof of her honour. Jummo spreads the sheets, already bloodstained from her wedding night, and the Ram undertakes what seems to be a second consummation of the marriage. Jummo narrates: “Seventy thousand black and white horns charge at me and send me toppling into a bottomless well. All the horns cluster into one huge fiery horn of black and white and it’s digging deep, deep, deep inside me, penetrating to the base of my spine” (186). The vision ends with Jummo waking in the courtyard of her marital house with the bundle soaked with blood (186). After this incident, Jummo tells Nara that the blood is hers and Sidi Wahdana’s, who embodied the Ram (187).

The merging of the mystical and the profane in Alem’s depiction of this vision can be read as a way of refuting social convictions regarding women in the profane by referring to society’s view of the mystical. In this case, Alem uses the social perception of the mystical as gendered to interrogate social views of honour. Situating this vision on Jummo’s wedding morning, the time when loss of virginity becomes a celebrated event in Meccan society, underscores the various complications surrounding the consummation of marriage. It also leads the reader to consider the social factors behind this erotic experience. Jummo’s wedding sheets and the embroidered eyes, symbolising social observation, witness the blood twice. The second spill of blood is enough to submerge the first and fabricate the proof it is meant to indicate. The “penetration” in the mystical vision may as well happen on its own prior to Jummo’s marriage, thus unsettling the issue of her virginity. Depicting the soaked bundle as evidence of the mystical experience shows how Jummo’s vision leads to a physical assault that, although not precisely coitus, still threatens her virginity. For Alem, the social perception of honour that implies virginity is not accurate. Alem’s use of the motif of “piercing and penetration” has transgressed the symbolic allusion of mystical connotations, leading to a feminist questioning of social norms.

Alem’s attempt to complicate the issue of virginity stems from the interconnection of spirituality and sexuality in Ibn ‘Arabi’s Sufism’s conception of theophany. As the discussion of Khemir’s film indicates, a man’s sexual relationship with a woman whom he acknowledges as theophany is not constrained by marital bonds. This is supported by a contextual emphasis on men’s spirituality and the abstraction of the woman as an ideal. Thus, neglecting religious and social norms in such relations shows that men’s sexuality is not obliged to abide by these norms. For Alem, confining honour to the feminine body whilst disregarding male sexuality is simply dealing only with half of reality.
Alem’s subversive narrative seems to be in agreement with Fatima Mernissi’s criticism; in her article “Virginity and Patriarchy” (1982), Mernissi criticises patriarchal attachment to proof of women’s purity, attributing it to what she calls “irrational schizophrenic contradictions” (185). For Mernissi, not questioning the physical purity of the man and assigning honour to women’s bodies leads men to enjoy unrestrained sexuality whilst increasingly oppressing their female relatives (185). Mernissi’s discussion highlights a core issue—that is, conceptualising honour as a value not equally required from men and women leads to such contradiction. Situating the issue of virginity within this context is an attempt to loosen the grip of patriarchal society on women’s bodies as hallmarks of honour. Alem desacralises the Sufi concept of theophany and places it in its social context, showing the extent to which Sufi ideology is based on patriarchal elements that do not permit women to seek a spiritualised sexuality in the profane under the same umbrella of theophany. As the discussion shows, theophany is not a state that can be approached independently, and patriarchs refuse to grant women such a position because sexual practices may ensue.

The erotic plays a key role in examining and subverting the patriarchy-propagated duality. Furthermore, Alem’s adoption of this motif shows how the duality negatively affects Jummo’s self-perception. Alem’s use of erotic experience compels the reader to consider whether the denial of the feminine body and its desires in the profane renders the mystical an ideal space to fulfil these desires. This can imply a reading of the aforementioned vision as explicating Jummo’s unspoken refusal of sexual relations with her husband, thus leading to the second consummation of marriage. In fact, Jummo’s intimate shortening of Sidi Wahdana’s name to Sidi, which she frequently pronounces “formally and very softly” (108), hints at her perception of their relationship as akin to a marital bond. In fact, the title “Sidi” seems to be derived from the twentieth-century conventions of Meccan women, who adopted it to address their husbands as a display of respect (Yamani 41). Jummo’s relationship to Sidi Wahdana seems to adopt a form of hierarchy akin to traditional gender relations in Jummo’s society.

Furthermore, Jummo’s eroticism dominates her attention to an extent that seems to grow beyond its original function as solely spiritual. Another intense erotic experience is shown as follows:

Jummo puffs into the incense burner, inflaming the embers of the aloe and musk, dizzying herself on the fumes . . . She crosses to the mirror and takes off her clothes. Piece by piece she peels the curtains from the theatre of her body; she stands shining, a naked radiance split by the black cord circling her waist . . . amulets jingle against her belly . . . She’s sweating with the effort of trying to see
her body whole and clear. . . Jummo sighs the name of her first man: Mayjan. My-
jahn . . . She exhales the name of her second lover: Sidi Wahdana. (1 [emphasis in
original])

This experience is motivated by Jummo’s need to achieve true contact with her
body, contact that is incomplete without the presence of the masculinised spirit of Sidi
Wahdana and the spirit of her deceased beloved Mayjan. This recalls de Beauvoir’s
assertion that erotic experiences are motivated by patriarchal restrictions that deprive
women of any acknowledgement. In this scene, Jummo’s navigation of her body in front of
the mirror serves as a literal exemplification of what de Beauvoir calls “narcissistic”
mysticism (711). A more profound form of “narcissism” is seen in the way that Jummo’s
experience of her body requires the male presence and gaze to acknowledge the body being
seen “whole and clear” (1). Alem seems to appropriate de Beauvoir’s criticism of the erotic
feminine experience; patriarchal identification of femininity, which stems from the body,
haunts women’s mysticism due to its profound influence on women’s self-perception. In
fact, the overt reference to the watching eyes, as in the previous discussion of “Sidi’s eye”
and the embroidered eyes of the sheet, implies that women’s “narcissism” is a product of
socially constituted self-reflection. Jummo’s dire need for recognition is indicated in the
narrator’s assertion that at her first meeting with Sidi Wahdana at Yaqut Khan’s party, she
sinks into the spirit’s “bottomless eye,” connoting an attempt to verify that the spirit’s gaze
is directed towards her (37). The narrator explains: “She felt certain he was seeing her—
yes, blind he truly was, yet truly he was seeing her” (38). Jummo seeks recognition via her
mystical encounter with Sidi Wahdana, whose eye is appointed by society as essential for
self-perception.

Alem indicates that social attempts to extend patriarchal control over the mystical
via epistemological manipulation hinder Sufi women’s agency. Persistent social influence
over the mystical completely annihilates women’s individuality and spiritual insight. The
gaze, unlike the Prince’s in Bab’Aziz, is not directed at the divine within oneself, nor does
it result in self-knowledge. The objective of the gaze and its attributes are formulated by
society and do not occur as a mystical call.

Alem’s utilisation of sexualised spirituality shows the way the domestication of the
mystical and its confinement to the body deprives women of agency. Alem perceives in
such a paradigm the dissolution of the Sufi concept of theophany. Reducing women to the
body ensures their inability to approach such a position, not only because of the abstract
aura that surrounds such a concept, but also because the feminine body, as seen in the
gendered duality of mysticism, reflects the profane that lacks perfection. As Christ puts it,
locating women’s mysticism within a body that is “changing” and “finite” alienates them
from a spiritual quest for unity with the divine (162-3). In monotheistic religions, she continues, the divine is perceived as “absolute, infinite, and unchanging,” attributes that belong to the other side of the duality, namely to the male as capable of transcendence (162).

Jummo’s mystical experience, just like that of other Meccan women, is directed towards mundane states of the feminine body, such as puberty, marriage and pregnancy, all of which are represented as being influenced by Sidi Wahdana. For instance, Jummo’s puberty is attributed to Sidi Wahdana’s visit to the family’s house (19-20). Hannah’s pregnancies and miscarriages are all associated with visions in which she sees the spirit (78-84). Such mystical interactions firmly situate women’s mysticism within the confines of the imperfect body and distance them from the position of theophany. As Christ’s account suggests, these states are, in the eyes of the patriarchs, a source of imperfection because they root women in the profane and therefore make their mysticism at odds with the idealist image of theophany.

Alem’s narrative urges scepticism regarding the way the feminine body comes to occupy such a central position in identifying women’s relation to the mystical. Alem introduces a bizarre case in which a she-cat is adopted and named Hanim, or “lady,” by Sheikh al-Baikwaly (113). The narrator, however, indicates that Hanim is a “cat-who-wasn’t-a-cat,” suggesting that the animal is the embodiment of a genii (113). Despite its sex, the cat participates in the Sheik’s transcendental ritual:

Sheik Baikwaly did not sleep, and Hanim was his companion in constant wakefulness. She would meet her master way off on the wrinkled horizon and ascend along with his soul, much to the astonishment of his guests and the young women of the household, who regarded the Sheik and his cat like a couple of stone idols or shrines whose aura was as mystifying as their acutely felt absence in the Unknown. (115)

The cat’s ability to transcend the body is only possible because she is not subject to social constructions of gender. This depiction eloquently deconstructs the logic behind gendering the body according to its biological functions. Having emphasised the differences between gender and sex, Alem seems to adopt de Beauvoir’s famous statement that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (281) to contest patriarchal views. For Alem, women’s alienation from the mystical is a result of an intentional masculine manipulation of gender.

Unlike Hanim, Meccan women are unable to acquire the position of theophany independently. As the discussion of Khemir’s film shows, theophany is only seen as such in a man’s eye, which further complicates the matter in a society dominated by a gendered
struggle for power. Meccan patriarchs refuse women such a position because it grants them authority and provides them with a public presence, which can result in the merging of women’s mysticism with issues of social justice. The novel shows how women are not permitted a say in social issues; for instance, Nara rebukes Jummo for questioning the convention of keeping the bride’s name hidden: “What’s gotten into you, girl, talking such a trash? . . . talking about [marriage] just like men do!” (23). The disassociation of mysticism from issues of social justice and women’s questioning of their situation may render the mystical experience a patriarchal tool used to ensure women’s subservience.

The acculturation of the feminine body results in distancing women from the public space. As the discussion of Hamida Khaja’s agency will further clarify, Alem represents this as another reason why bodily mysticism complicates agency. Jummo’s mysticism is not agentic; because it does not transcend the body, it succumbs to the patriarchal ideology of the feminine body and female mysticism. Jummo’s accounts of her visions are dismissed by Nara as “hallucinations” (187). Entangled with social taboos, mysticism does not permit Jummo to exert power over her world. More importantly, Jummo does not reach a stage of spiritual knowledge, the cornerstone of Alem’s view of agency.

In contrast to Jummo’s experience, Alem represents another form of female mysticism that, in the absence of a patriarchal epistemological hierarchy, becomes able to situate mystic women in a high spiritual and social position. Alem’s affront at the social manipulation of female mysticism is manifested in the way she represents social interaction with the ideal experience of Hamida Khaja. Hamida’s spirituality uncovers patriarchal society’s failure to deal with theophany. Hamida is a Khazar woman who lives in Mount Nowaria (Alem, My Thousand 156) and is one of the Nowaria women who can influence nature, bringing blessings or catastrophes; because of her place on the high mountain, she is capable of reaching Heaven with her prayers (156). Her ancestors, the Khajas, are known for their immense knowledge: “Khajas are feared and respected for their knowledge, which is so subtle and far-reaching that people regard them as omniscient” (156). On the other hand, her beauty and cheerful character earn her the title of “Tobab al-Jana, the Lawn of the Garden of Eden” (157). Her supernatural characteristics situate her in a position par excellence: “Hamida Khaja - her kindness is the kindness of Radwan, the Guardian of Eden; her compassion is infinite. Her wrath is the wrath of Malik, the Guardian of Hell; her wrath is fire upon fire” (157). Because she is a representation of the divine, her Heaven and Hell represent justice. Similarly, her love and hatred are an actualisation of God’s love and hatred. As theophany, the way Hamida is seen by men is an indication of their spirituality and capacity to approach the divine dhat. That is, as Henry Corbin puts it, every mystic “establishes” in theophany “the God of his faith, the God
whom he nourishes with the substance of his being” (Corbin 142). Therefore, successfully approaching Hamida permits the actualisation of divine love.

However, unlike other Meccan women, Hamida refuses to submit to patriarchal subjugation: “there was no husband, no neighbor—alive or dead—bold enough to try saddling Hamida Khaja” (157). Hamida’s husband’s submission to her “mercurial moods” enables him to enjoy “one astonishing delight after another” (My Thousand 157), and his devotion and submission permit him to experience divine unification. This poses a challenge to the spirituality of the patriarchs of Mecca. The Meccans fail to approach Hamida due to their inability to perceive a woman as being a reflection of the divine dhat, which would imply acknowledgement of the wholeness of this woman. Hamida is a transcendental image, liberated from patriarchal authority and bodily mysticism by her knowledge. This enables her to challenge patriarchy’s attempts to prevent women’s access to public space. Unlike the majority of Meccan women, who are called by their family name or by a nickname, she is recognised by her first name, which denotes that her identity is freed from the burdens of her gender: “Hamida is Khaja, Hamida cannot be denied” (My Thousand 157). Furthermore, Hamida’s public position is enforced through her position as a leader of her community. She takes responsibility for the people of the Nowaria Mountain, ensuring they are well received by Meccans (156-7). Contrary to patriarchal assumptions, Hamida’s knowledge results in maintaining the community’s welfare. Her mystical practice and her autonomy represent the ideal feminine character for women in a patriarchal society.

However, Hamida’s social liberation may have preceded and facilitated her spiritual and epistemological liberation. The extraordinary knowledge of the Khajas places them in a distinct social position. Hamida is privileged by a noble spiritual lineage that exempts the Khajas from the social obligation to follow Meccan patriarchal norms. The narrator explains that “Hamida was allowed to live wild, and she grew even wilder” (157). Alem’s highlighting of the social situation of the Khajas seems to assert the powerful influence of society. She suggests that prominent Sufi women are only capable of being so in exceptional circumstances that liberate them from social obligations. Similar advantages can be found in the social background of many remarkable Sufi women throughout history. Such examples include Lalla Zainab of Algeria (1850-1904), whose Sufism was supported by her father’s desire to appoint her as his successor, permitting her to remain celibate and socially autonomous (Bashir 141). In her case, her father seemed to perceive celibacy as a form of autonomy that allowed his daughter to avoid a husband’s authority (141). Shahzad Bashir claims in “Islamic Tradition and Celibacy” (2007) that even Rabi’a al-‘Adawiyya (714-801), whose mystic devotion is mostly recalled as unprecedented among women,
would not have been able to transcend the predominance of the patriarchy if not for the slavery that isolated and distanced her from any family connections (137). Women’s spiritual advancement is strictly conditioned by their social context. Both Jummo and Hamida belong to Khazar migrants; however, due to her prestigious social position as a daughter of the “Sheik of the Zamzam water carriers” (62), Jummo’s spirituality is controlled by the need to maintain social norms. Social position emphasises the application of more restrictions on women for the sake of assimilation. On the other hand, Hamida’s scholarly ancestors distanced themselves from this context, showing Alem’s view that women’s agency is deeply related to inherited rather than individual factors.

Social domination over spirituality prompts a brief review of the previously discussed argument offered by Asad on the legitimacy of social hierarchy over individual spirituality. In Asad’s terms, a community has the right to correct an individual’s religiosity because it is perceived as contributing to the collective wellbeing (Formations 91). Asad’s argument is based on the ideal notion that society views religion as an ultimate cause prioritised according to social norms. However, as Alem’s novel makes explicit, this hierarchy can easily form socially gendered standards of religion. As the novel asserts, Jummo’s Sufism is severely hindered by her femininity, and her family’s fear of social dishonour compels the application of many restrictions. Overall, as the discussion of this novel shows, the extent to which women’s spirituality is owned and manipulated by society makes women’s demand for agency a demand to contest collective moral hierarchy over the individual. The following discussion of Fatma reveals how women’s mystical agency is shaped as a rebellion against collective ideological and social powers.

4. Agent in Fatma:

Fatma (2005) opens with the eponymous protagonist having been thrown out to the street by her husband, Sajir, after twenty years of marriage (1-3). Sajir makes it clear that Fatma is a “curse” and must not return to his house (1). However, Fatma receives this as though she were “a broken statue,” feeling nothing—“no anger, no humiliation” (1-2). The Yemenite porter who is the only man Fatma knows in this world apart from her recently deceased father and her ex-husband accompanies her in the roads, although he is very careful not to excite public suspicions of any inappropriate relationship (3). The men in the street are seen by Fatma as “doll-like . . . hypnotized by the same spell” apart from one driver who stops to offer Fatma a lift home (3-4). She recognizes this driver as identical to the figure of “the hero holding the lion-flag” engraved on her brass urn (5). This urn was the object of her spiritual meditation prior to her marriage. Seeing this man, Fatma recalls her story, revealing a life layered with reality, allusions and dreams.
Fatma was a lonely girl who lived with her father, Mansoor, after the death of her mother (6). She was married to Sajir, a handsome young man, at the age of sixteen (10). The marriage took place in Mansoor’s house and brought about “sudden, drastic change” (10), introducing Fatma to a totally new world. Fatma’s relationship with her husband is defined by their first sexual interaction, when he rapes her violently, filling her with rage (13-4). Fatma starts stitching and meditating on her magical ‘abaya, a loose black garment. She inherited the ‘abaya from her grandmother, Shumla, an aging and highly spiritual woman (12). The ‘abaya, her only connection with her female ancestors, forms Fatma’s gateway to the mystical and her path to agency.

Fatma’s marital house is small and consists of two rooms, one of which is “forbidden” to her (15). A few days after their marriage, Fatma discovers that Sajir owns a snake farm that he keeps in the closed room opposite her bedroom (16). Once, the Great Horned Black, the most dangerous snake in Sajir’s farm, slips into Fatma’s bed and bites her (19). This bite pleases Fatma (19). After this, both Fatma and the snake undergo similar transformations. Fatma survives the bite and wakes from her long sleep a woman-snake (23). She resumes her premarital meditations, this time near the stone basin in the snake farm. These meditations result in a new acquaintance, her mystical friend Noor. Her new body alters her into a seductive and spiritual but very venomous woman, allowing her to become a source of constant pain to Sajir (23). He, in turn, soothes his accumulated anger by raping Fatma frequently (90, 133).

Fatma becomes attached to the snakes and devotes herself to caring for them tenderly. Sajir’s farm becomes popular and profitable (68). This attracts the attention of King Nasra in Najran, the south region of Arabia, who invites Sajir to demonstrate his distinct collection of snakes (68). Fearing the disobedience of the snakes, Sajir takes Fatma with him, forcing her to dress in men’s clothing (69). In Najran, Fatma encounters new people whom she feels she has known for a long time, such as Ibn Madhy, Ibn Sakran, Prince Taray and Balkees. During the journey, Fatma’s transmutation into a snake is amplified (107). After returning home, Sajir attempts to rape her twice more; the first results in her bleeding and being confined to bed for days (133), but the second castrates Sajir (133, 142), prompting him to cast Fatma out into the street (143). This incident puts an end to Fatma’s marriage and imprisonment. Fatma dies in the street, and her spirit is unified once more with the beloved people of Najran (150).

Another story evolves parallel to and within the story of Fatma’s liberation, that of the oppression and annihilation of the ancient believers of Najran, who were burned by their king. Alem recounts a Qur’anic story of ancient Najran: a tyrannical king, Thonawas,
sentenced his believer subjects to death by throwing them in a great fire (116). In an apocalyptic fashion, the fire is resurrected towards the end of Fatma’s life, expelling people and spreading death and destruction (137). The only way to kill the fire lies in Fatma’s own spirituality. Her spirituality is described as a dammed “river,” the key to which is handed to her by Ibn Madhy in a vision (137, 150). After her death, Fatma battles Thonawas and defeats him, putting an end to an extended reign of tyranny (150). Fulfilling the meaning of her name, explained in the novel as connoting “The Nurturer or Nurse for short—as in, the one who nursed your own mother right out of this world” (7), Fatma “nurses” Sajir out of his masculinity and terminates Thonowas’ tyranny.

5. Fatma the Feminine Body as a Mystical Body:

As an illiterate, impoverished and lonely woman under the control of two unspiritual patriarchs, her father and her husband, Fatma’s struggle represents vulnerable women’s search for agency. Fatma’s vulnerability stems from her gender and her social isolation from any feminine community. Alem’s depiction of Fatma’s struggle highlights her perspective on the interconnection of oppression and ideological marginalisation of both Sufism and women. Sajir is a representation of this hierarchy on the personal level, whereas Thonawas represents the collective level. Sajir is not described as a religious person. He represents what Alem sees as the unspiritual patriarch who is influenced by Wahhabi ‘ulama’s interpretations of religious texts that represent women as lustful. Even though men may not attempt to conform to religion themselves, they seek to restrict women in its name. For Alem, women’s religious agency is hindered by the reciprocal interaction between misogynist social traditions and patriarchal religious scholarship.

In her book Women and Words in Saudi Arabia (1994), Saddeka Arebi explains that from the viewpoint of many Saudi feminists, patriarchy is a power strategy utilised by the ideological “centers of power” to monopolise both men and women (273). She continues: “The patriarchal ideology may be sustained either because it serves men’s psychological need for power or because of the social incentives of the high status rewarded to those who acquire the skill of controlling women” (274). Within this system, men are utilised to monitor women’s religiosity. This system can present many challenges to women’s intuitional knowledge. Alem sees the propagation of this model of gender relations to be deeply related to the socially imbued fear of women and their lust. For Alem, such propagation is caused by what she, in an interview cited by Arebi, calls

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59 This story has a dedicated chapter in the Qur’an, soura AlBourouj (chapter no. 85).
60 Alem seems to refer to a prophetic tradition that foretells of a great fire casting people at the end of time towards the land of al-Hashr, or “gathering,” on the Day of Judgement (Al-Bukhârî 3151). Alem links the two fires: the ancient buried evil is reborn and is put to death just as the Day of Judgment starts.
“patterning of thought,” or tanmeet (114). By “patterning of thought,” Alem indicates the creation of a single system of narrative. Arebi explains: “patterning of thought . . . is for Raja a powerful tool, utilized by the centres of power to ensure a high degree of consensus in their definition of ‘truth’” (114).

From her first day as Sajir’s wife, Fatma understands that he treats her with a mixture of “fear” and “rage.” She wonders “what [he was] afraid of” and “where his rage came from” (13-4). The narrator describes an incident in which Fatma sees her husband’s soul gripped by a monster-like being (27). In The Dove’s, Alem utilises a similar monster-like metaphor to describe how patriarchal social traditions clamp down on women. Alem puts the following words into the mouth of Aisha, who works as a teacher: “What a joke! I was just one of the neighbourhood’s many tentacles; one of a countless many who wage war against fate, stifling young girls” (51). Wahhabi-derived social traditions institutionalise guardianship over women’s morality to ensure that women are disciplined and their negative impact is contained.

In Fatma, Alem rejects the way such “patterning of thought” moulds an ideological hierarchy. Patriarchs convinced of such a hierarchy attempt to control women ideologically. This is exemplified in the scene in which Fatma is cast out of the house by Sajir and the Yemenite porter asks her to go from the “light” to the “shadow” (4). This phrasing has a double meaning: Patriarchs perceive women’s presence in the public space to be dangerous, and therefore they have to withdraw to the “shadow” where they are subject to epistemological and social isolation. The second meaning is interconnected with the Sufi idea of light, or noor, connoting spiritual knowledge; thus, male hierarchy over religious discourse tends to claim ownership of the light.

Alem seems to blame men who perform this role for their lack of insight. Fatma views the men in the street as “doll-like” and “hypnotized by the same spell” (3), connoting their readiness to follow the pattern of thought propagated for them. Due to his submissive incarnation of the common ideological pattern, Sajir is depicted as a “mask”: “Twenty years, night after night, Fatma faced that mask. Twenty years she fed it, washed its rags and went to bed with it” (3-4). The depiction of Sajir as lacking ideological and spiritual competence shows how such features accommodate misogyny. Following this trend encourages him to subjugate Fatma both because of her gender and her Sufism.

Alem depicts how Sajir orders Fatma to dress in male clothes to travel to Najran (69). Sajir’s fear of Fatma’s body leads him to impose a complete concealment of it, as revealed in the way concealing Fatma’s femininity eases Sajir’s anxiety. As long as Fatma is disguised as a man, Sajir perceives her as such (90). The narrator says that, during the
journey, Sajir “came to think of her as [a boy]. He also seemed to put aside his anger and determination to destroy [Fatma], body and soul” (90). This indicates that Sajir’s violence corresponds to the gender of Fatma’s body as well as the taboos associated with it. In her article “Women Narrating the Gulf: A Gulf of Their Own” (2005), Hager Ben Driss explains that gender transgression in Alem’s narrative illustrates that “Alem subverts the conservative discourse based on hierarchy by suggesting that the gulf separating men and women, in terms of cultural representation, is nothing more than a question of chiffon” (163). Ultimately, this narrative reflects the shallowness of gender classifications and subverts patriarchal concepts predicated upon these classifications. In patriarchal discourse, the feminine body is defined according to the view of the man, who due to the system of concealment becomes its sole beholder. This last notion will be revisited shortly to analyse how Alem utilises it to depict Fatma’s body’s revenge against Sajir.

Sajir’s oppression of Fatma takes many forms of social isolation as well as physical and verbal abuse. The narrator describes a situation in which Sajir expresses his anger at seeing Fatma occupied with her ritualistic stitching of her ‘abaya:

She looked up at him towering over her, evaluating her body. She let his resentment drip on her like chilly syrup. ‘Can’t you see the irony of your situation?’ he said sharply. ‘Your body, that body of yours, it’s barren as a stone–and there you sit making yourself even more miserable embroidering those idiotic talismans. . .
You’re wasting your time on nonsense; it’s not getting you anywhere . . . You must hate yourself very much. (45-6)

This seems to represent a typical example of the aggression practised by the anti-Sufism and anti-women social parties targeted by Alem. The prejudice Sajir shows against Fatma’s spirituality, eminently highlighted in the choice of words like “nonsense” and “idiotic,” signifies his embodiment of the anti-Sufi ideology. Sajir plays the dual role of the individual patriarch and the collective religious guardian. The two roles intersect in his previous remark on Fatma’s body: even though he despises her use of talismans, her body is not worthy of their intended bliss and protection.

Due to Alem’s rejection of patriarchal authority, she depicts meditation as an individual and internal way of approaching the mystical. The objects of Fatma’s meditation, the ‘abaya and the brass urn, show the severely limited world in which she lives: Due to her complete confinement, Fatma’s meditation focuses on household items. Fatma’s spiritual advancement is marked by her bodily transformation: The more she approaches the mystical within, the more her body bears the features of a serpent. Alem’s selection of the serpent derives its meaning from her Sufi and feminist context. As
previously indicated, “animal,” literally hayawan, is derived from the same root as hayah or hayat, meaning “life.” A third meaning can be derived by stressing the letter y in the two words: hayyah, a serpent, and haiayyat, serpents. For Alem, the serpent is a symbol of internal spirituality. In My Thousand, Alem depicts an ironical situation when, upon Jummo’s death, an Indonesian immigrant who works for the family confuses the two words, inadvertently making a profound spiritual statement: “Momma Jummo . . . she got no serpent [life] in this world no more . . .” The narrator comments:

Picture it: Jummo has no serpent anymore; her inner animal, her snake-essence, has made off with her soul . . . There must be some mistake . . . the Indonesian . . . has confused our word for life with the word for snake. But his mistake is eerily precise: the certainty of Jummo’s existence has slithered out of our grasp. (260)

The surprise delivered in these words stems from the way the migrant confuses the word for life with that for serpent, thus indicating a profound Sufi notion. According to Alem, the spirit is symbolised as a serpent or “larva.” Upon her death, Fatma’s emerging spirit is described as “a black larva. . . a magnificent serpent of blue – or purple black” (147). The symbol of the serpent makes its way into many of Alem’s texts. It signifies feminine spirituality, power, slyness and revenge. In addition to Fatma, Alem represents serpents as connoting spirituality in two works: Jinniyat Lar (2000) and her short story, “The Great Serpent” (2012).

In these texts, the protagonists personify a duality of spirit and serpent. In Jinniyat Lar, Alem utilises the myth of the blue serpent that inhabited the River Lar to articulate her anti-patriarchal ideas. Alem explains that the River Lar, which vanished long ago, was recorded in Ptolemy’s chronicles as a great river that existed in Najran, in the southern part of Arabia, and which has been prophesied to flow again (3). The serpent’s blueness is described by travellers’ tablets as harmful to the eyes. She deceives people who are attracted to her bright colour so that she can take them captive (4). Alem seems to refer to the Sufi traditional views of women as being attracted to “colour” and beauty and therefore lustful. Here, Alem holds men responsible for their own whims. The protagonists of Jinniyat Lar, the spirits or Jinniyat, are blue serpents, who, as Alem explains “possess bodies incredibly lithe and voluptuous and endowed with pure animal spirit. Without

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61 Ibn Manṣūr (1233-1312) explains this in detail in his book, Lisān al-ʿArab (vol. 14); for instance, he states that “Hayyah is the known serpent derived from hayat [life]” (220) and that “hayawan is a name for every living thing” (214). This meaning is connected to Alem’s use of the river of animal, or nahr al-hayawan.

62 Jonah Winters in “Themes of the ‘Erotic’ in Sufi Mysticism” (1996) explains how some Sufi mystics see women’s interest in beauty as “animal qualities” and as a contamination of spirituality (92).
restriction of form, the Jinniyat are able to turn into drops of water and seep into stone, or become chameleons and delve into fathomless caves” (4).

The body of the spiritual female is beyond material conceptualisations and restraints. It is powerful and capable of revenge against patriarchy. As the study of Fatma reveals, the feminine body’s revenge is independent of the woman’s will. Feminine resistance and revenge stem from the body’s ability of transmutation, which coincides with the development of spirituality. The use of the serpent to symbolise the feminine internal connection to the mystical is profoundly meaningful within Alem’s feminist discourse. The conventional conceptions associated with serpents, such as slyness and fatality, are deployed as tools of revenge within the mystical power provided solely to women in Alem’s texts. In particular, the reiteration of the serpent’s capacity for revenge utilises a traditional perspective of women/serpent in order to challenge power relations within patriarchal society.

In her short story “The Great Serpent,” Alem describes the snake as a child of Tuba, which is a tree in heaven, and as an ultra-spiritual creature (330). The protagonist of this story is a spirit that is traumatised by the ignorance and social fanaticism of the Meccans, who imprison the spirit for attempting to save a woman in labour (328). The protagonist resists any attempt at physical conceptualisation: It is a genderless spirit, moving through the story from one body to another. This abstract protagonist was born in 500 AH/1106 AD in Granada, Andalusia (Alem 324). The spirit befriends Ibn-Tufail (1105-1185) and incarnates in the body of Ibn Tufail’s protagonist, Hai Ibn Yaqzan (translated by Fedwa Malti-Douglas as “Alive Son of Awake” (52) in his novel of the same title). After the death of Ibn-Tufail, the spirit moves east to Mecca to inhabit the body of Fatimah Al-Makkiah (325). Noticing her attempt to perform a caesarean surgery that she learned from her life in Andalusia, the Meccans suspect that she is possessed by a genii and imprison her for many years in a completely sealed room (328). The extended imprisonment of such an abstract protagonist is justified by the spirit’s will to postpone escape until the death of Fatimah’s family. The spirit escapes Mecca in the body of a pigeon, only to find itself longing to return to the world of the humans (329). It substantiates in the body of Al-Zahra, a newborn girl, who soon becomes preoccupied with the mystical world (330). After marriage, her mysticism becomes a torment to her husband. The husband, whom Alem describes as a “common, simple man,” becomes unable to make peace with the protagonist’s mystical experience (333). Her mysticism destroys her husband, and despite her ability to help him, she refuses to do so because she perceives

63 Abu Bakr Mohammed ibn Abd al-Malik ibn Muhammed ibn Tufail al-Qaisi (1105-1185).
him as a hindrance to her mysticism (333). The serpent, or spiritual woman, finds life to be a tool within her in the struggle against patriarchy.

In Fatma, transmutation is the protagonist’s way of resisting aggression. The transmutation is initiated by the snake's bite, which seemingly releases Fatma’s “true self.” The narrator explains that Fatma “was delirious with pleasure when she felt its bite. The burning sensation shot deep inside her, and she passed out” (19). The eroticism of the bite seems to suggest that this bite replaces the sexual relationship to which Fatma’s “true self” aspires. The unification of snake and woman leads to the death of the serpent and the transformation of Fatma into “woman-snake”:

Fatma’s sigh came from the depths of creation. In no time she was sitting up and blooming. Her sapphire skin turned ruby-red, then paled to a rosy glow. Her arms and legs rippled like the limbs of an enchanting nymph, no longer a girl but a seductive woman overflowing with life. She looked around; there was an unmistakeable erotic twinkle in her eyes. (23)

Fatma’s unification with the serpent alters her from “a girl” to “a seductive woman,” hinting at the sensual fulfilment she experiences during the bite. As in the works by Al-Koni and Khemir, the unification is not presented in a logical depiction. The logical prey of this encounter, Fatma, survives, whereas the powerful predator is annihilated. The spiritual union of the pair creates what Sajir perceives to be “the most dangerous kind of snake, a woman-snake” (23). Sajir leans on his social culture to decode the union of Fatma and the snake: His view that Fatma becomes even more dangerous than the dead snake has its roots in cultural ideology.

Hend Al-Sudairy explains in her article entitled “A New Reading of the Serpent Myth in the Ancient and Modern Arab Culture” (2013) that in Arabia, as well as in other cultures, there is a tendency to connect women to serpents, representing them as the embodiment of evil (Al-Sudairy 16). According to Al-Sudairy, in such societies women are linked to the devil and the serpent, creating a triangle of evil that entices women to harm men (10). Al-Sudairy explains that this notion relies on religious heritage, as it refers to the well-known story of Adam and Eve (15). Eve allegedly cooperated with the serpent, which resulted in humanity’s fall from paradise. Recollection of examples from religious history may be utilised by advocates of patriarchy to generate a hostile patriarchal discourse and to pave the way for disparaging women and making them responsible for social defects. In her attempts to contest “patterning of thought,” particularly notions and images utilised to justify women’s oppression, Alem uses the symbol of the serpent to highlight the immense injustice to which women are subjected. The symbol is rich, comprising layers of meanings
that, within the social context, reveal an embodiment of the patriarchal perspective of women. This depiction makes the patriarchal discourse a subject of interrogation.

The narrative of Fatma poses a valuable question: Who witnesses Fatma’s transmutation into a serpent? The question is not intended to cast doubt on the reality of the transmutation because this may lead to another discussion of the boundaries between the mystical and the profane and the extent to which a secular reading can tolerate such transmutation as a form of agency. Rather, the question is confined to the process of identifying the transmutation. Fatma is confined within the walls of her husband’s house for twenty years (3), and during these years she has hardly any human contact. Apart from her husband, she is capable only of meeting the people of Najran. Fatma’s transmutation is not seen by the people of Najran. Even though they hold a similar conviction that connects women to serpents, as they believe that “a woman’s poison is more powerful than a snake’s” (Alem 97), Fatma’s disguise as a male snake shepherd provides her with an escape from this perspective in another ironical depiction of the way socially fixed stereotypes create gender roles. Therefore, Sajir is the sole beholder, the only witness to the transmutation, and he is its object.

During the last few years of Fatma’s life, she is envisigated by her husband as a lethal, demon-like creature who contaminates the atmosphere with a poisonous musk smell and smoke stench (138). Her transmutation is a torture for Sajir. The narrator describes how Fatma, in one incident, wakes to find him vomiting as if he were poisoned. He shouts: “I can’t stand the way you smell . . . Were you in the habit of entertaining visitors while I was away? . . . Where in God’s name do you get it all?” (138-9). His confidence in his power to isolate her is shaken because of the ample amount of musk he thinks she uses. Fatma’s confinement permits her transmutation to be exposed solely to Sajir. This recalls Khemir’s depiction of Zahra, who is portrayed as a paradise exclusively available to Osman. In the same way Osman is rewarded by Zahra for his spirituality, Sajir is tormented by Fatma due to his lack of spirituality. However, Alem’s feminist-oriented critique does not stop there. Unlike Khemir, whose depiction of Zahra and many female characters is limited to the abstract, Alem elucidates the characterisation of Fatma and the manner in which Sajir’s patriarchy qualifies him for such a punishment.

The depiction of Fatma’s transmutation climaxes with Sajir’s castration. Sajir’s attempts to destroy Fatma’s “true self” lead to his own downfall. “When I portray deformed characters,” Alem asserts, “I in fact signify a deformed reality” (interview with Arebi 113). The “deformed” masculine body is a depiction of the state of a manhood that is established on women’s oppression. In Fatma, the patriarch’s own body becomes a
testimony to woman’s achievement of agency. Patriarchy is, for Alem, stimulated and encouraged by attempts at masculine affirmation; in a patriarchal society, control over women enhances the sense of manhood. The castration of Sajir reflects “a reality” from which patriarchy suffers; that is, women’s emancipation is a deficiency of manhood. Fatma’s transmutation alters the image of the feminine body as vicious, shifting it from an idea to an embodiment and thereby subjecting this image, as well as patriarchal ideology, to an interrogation of its validity. This renders Sajir, or patriarchy in general, an object upon which this emerging “reality” is transcribed.

Alem carefully weaves the events leading to Sajir’s castration, including Sajir’s abuse of Fatma and the gradually growing independence of her body, which starts to express her spiritual state without any conscious control on her part. In the same way she watches her body transform, she watches it take revenge:

Fatma’s body made a decision on its own: Her muscles convulsed, becoming hard as emerald, and gripped his sword. He drew back in shock but was unable to pull out. The Nurse’s soft feminine sinews had taken control, ignoring Sajir’s curses and threats, and Fatma’s own surprise. She was as helpless as he was. (142)

Fatma’s mysticism is a transcendental one, creating a detachment between her body and her spirituality. In her mystical world, Fatma is becoming a spiritual leader battling King Thonawas and his Serpent; simultaneously, in the profane world, her body is abused by Sajir and the social and ideological patriarchal system. The fact that she has no will over her body is significant. Alem’s depiction of Fatma’s passivity may be attributed to mystical codes of embodiment. Assimilated to the messianic experience, the mystical body of Fatma is passive to the physical aggressions practiced upon it in the profane. This makes the aggression of Sajir more magnified: His aggression against the saint’s body, similar to that conducted by Cain against Assouf, is an aggression against the sacred within it. This aggression is underscored by the superiority of Fatma’s role in the mystical. Alem therefore asserts the gravity of patriarchal aggression against women by showing that women are embodiments of the mystical.

The transmutation in Fatma, as in The Bleeding of the Stone, turns the mystic into a saint whose body is transformed into collective property in order to accomplish a spiritual mission. In both novels, this mission subjects the political to mystical justice, in the sense that the political is interrogated within mystical terms and apocalyptic phenomena are invoked to undo the lack of justice. The use of archetypes facilitates the articulation of this mission in both novels. In The Bleeding of the Stone, Al-Koni opts to characterise the struggle against colonisation and neo-colonisation via a simple, yet profound, binary of
good and evil. Cain’s evil is fought by Asouf’s spirituality, but evil is only completely banished after Asouf’s “crucifixion” at the hands of Cain (96). Cain sees Asouf’s reality in a vision and realises that Asouf is a waddan (127). Completely blinded by the desire to eat meat, Cain hangs Asouf on a legendary rock and slaughters him like a waddan (134). The rock is carved with ancient drawings of a waddan and a priest and contains mysterious Touareg symbols (2). This fulfils the prophecy made by the soothsayer in Cain’s childhood: “Cain, son of Adam. . . you will never have your fill of meat or blood until you eat from Adam’s flesh and drink from Adam’s blood” (83). In fulfilling this prophecy, the “crucifixion” terminates the evil of Cain because it provokes an apocalypse. The content of the symbols on the rock is revealed by the narrator to confirm the soothsayer’s prophecy: “redemption will be at hand when the sacred waddan bleeds and the blood issues from the stone. It is then that the miracle will be born; that the earth will be cleansed and the deluge cover the desert” (135). Asouf’s sainthood is established by the manner in which his murder brings justice to earth and exterminates the evil of man.

Similarly, Fatma’s unification with the serpent leads her to battle evil both at the personal level of Sajir’s patriarchy and the collective level of King Thonawas. The archetype of King Thonawas’s battle against the believers in Najran, derived from religious history and occupying a whole chapter of the Qur’an, serves to articulate Alem’s dissent against Wahhabi ulama antagonistic to Sufism.

Like Asouf, Fatma’s sainthood is required for the apocalypse. Her sainthood is pronounced as she is provided with the key to the “great stone dam” that will extinguish Thonowas’ fire (111, 134). In a vision, Fatma sees the key, meaningfully secured in her ‘abaya, and she is told by Ibn Madhy that the key will only be released from the threads of her ‘abaya upon her death (112). The ownership of the key indicates that Fatma’s spirituality is perfected, making her ready to fight and annihilate the fire. After her death, she comes face to face with Thonawas and defeats him (150). Positioning the key in her ‘abaya signifies that the feminine dimension of the political narrative is as essential as the spiritual one. The resistance of the ideological oppression is deeply tied to the contestation of patriarchy. The ‘abaya that forms Fatma’s path to agency starts as an aspect of patriarchal domination over women’s spirituality and bodies. It summarises the extent of the ideological domination practised by what Alem calls the “culture of the centre” (qtd. in Arebi 114). The interpretation of the religious texts regarding women’s dress code is undertaken by Wahhabi patriarchs, who have a fixed mindset over the matter. In Fatma, the narrator explains Fatma’s reflection on her ‘abaya after being cast to the street by her

64 Al-Burooj, or The Constellation, chapter no.85
husband: “The black gown was a cold mask between her and the gaping world. She cast it off without thinking, though she knew that nothing would make her husband more furious than her publicly uncovered body” (2). She only wears it twice in the novel: on her way to her husband’s house after marriage and from the house to the street where she dies (2, 12). In both cases, Fatma is not permitted to decide whether or not to wear the ‘abaya because her body becomes her husband’s property. The ‘abaya is a spiritual medium when Fatma opts to use it as an object of meditation. Even though Fatma becomes spiritually and intellectually more advanced than her husband, she is not permitted to utilise her spiritual knowledge to make an informed decision regarding her body’s appearance in public. Alem therefore criticises the manner in which women’s dress code is the site of a profound hypocrisy, where patriarchy masks its archaic views of the feminine body with quotations from religious texts. In _The Dove’s_, Alem puts the following words on Yusuf’s tongue as he addresses Sheikh Muzahim, the father of Yusuf’s beloved Azza: “You build prisons with your left hand and mosques with your right. You’re always preaching about faith, but what faith? The faith of burying your daughter alive every day?” (32). Despite his public religiosity, Sheikh Muzahim’s patriarchal habits dominate over his religiosity regarding his daughter’s situation. The patriarchal-oriented religious ideology renders such hypocrisy possible by making religious concepts, such as the veil, objects of social manipulation. The ‘abaya is imposed upon Fatma to fulfil a social aim.

The utilisation of the ‘abaya complicates the binary of individual spirituality and collective patriarchy. The “key” of resistance implanted in Fatma’s ‘abaya is an intellectual one. Fatma’s meditation on the ‘abaya assists in her intellectual enlightenment. The meditation brings her closer to Noor, her internal spiritual teacher, who teaches her a spiritual way of reading: Noor “held out a new book and asked her to shut her senses, to deafen her ears and close her eyes. He pressed her fingers lightly against the page. The letters shed their silence and revealed their meaning. She began to read fluently” (59). This method is reminiscent of Jantzen’s elucidation of the duality separating intuitional knowledge from bodily mysticism (188). Due to her transcendental experience, Fatma is able to read many books, such as _The Book of Soul_ by Ibn-Qaem (1292-1350), _The Book of Animals_ by al-Jahiz (776-868), _The Book of Dreams_ by Ibn Seren (653-728) and _The Wonders of Creatures_ by al-Qazwene (1203-1283).65 Fatma discusses the content of these books extensively, and the narrative of the discussion abounds with Sufi wisdom derived from these classical books. Her meditation on the ‘abaya therefore channels a subversive

65 It is worth noting that many of these books also influenced Alem both literarily and spiritually (Alem “Reading the Infidels” 16).
intellectual discourse that resists the religious one propagated by the modern Islamic school of Wahhabism. Alem reiterates the necessity of internal knowledge to subvert the “patterning of thought” and to liberate the individual from collectively imposed religious and moral codes.

Alem refers frequently to classical intellectual resources, which like the aforementioned books may not completely comply with Ibn ‘Arabi’s Sufism, to produce a wider heterogeneous context of interrogation of the modern religious discourse. In The Great Serpent, the abstract protagonist who is born in Andalusia and becomes a friend of the Andalusian philosopher Ibn Tufail narrates how it travels to Andalusia and witnesses the advanced culture and creativity of Andalusian people: “People there would be going about their business, singing along and reciting their poems” (326-7). In this depiction, as the narrator continues, the caliph’s court flourishes with such talents (327).

In her journey to Najran, Fatma notices how the inhabitants of the cities are strikingly “empty” whereas those of the rural areas near Najran are “more real” (71). In the desert of Najran, the celebration in King Nasra’s camp shows the artistic superiority that differentiates guests with high spirituality from those without this intuition. Both Prince Taray and Ibn Madhy exhibit an unusual creativity, starting a spontaneous poetic challenge that fills the night with “a torrent of poetry” (80). Similarly, Ibn Sakran dances with his trained falcons, a captivating dance described as “more like a drug or magic potion than a dance” (78). The spirituality revived by the poetic performances is manifested by the participation of spirits that emerge from the desert sand (80). The spirituality of the artistic performance remains alien to Sajir, who is “sitting in a daze, with a look of permanent surprise on his face” (80). Sajir’s inability to perceive the spiritual performance is depicted by Alem as reflecting his ignorance. He is ignorant because his only source of knowledge is external and shaped by the “culture of the centre”.

Perceiving the desert to be a refuge of spirituality, Alem refuses to call the Arabian desert The Empty Quarter and opts for “The Immortal Quarter,” Ar-rub’ Al-Khalid rather than Ar-rub’ Al-Khali (Alem, Jinniyat Lar 4). In My Thousand, she explains the reasons behind this refusal:

Mecca lies in a barren desert surrounded by volcanic mountains. To a stranger the land looks empty, devoid of life. Actually it is full of life. The life appears in formations that bolt and gush from the soil of Mount Mercy, up from the deep-rooted bodies of ageless beings. Because these beings spring from the Yolk of Time, they are even more precious (if such qualities can be thought of as
measurable) than beings that grow in more fertile soils in other parts of the world.

(200)

The geography of the Meccan desert has a historical and ritualistic significance. Mount Mercy, for instance, is a spiritual place, a visit to which is fundamental to the accomplishment of Hajj. It is recognised as a landmark of historical value, as a place visited by prophets and where Adam and Eve met after the fall from Paradise.\(^{66}\) The spiritual value of this place, for Alem, renders human civilisations of “fertile soils” empty and superficial.\(^ {67}\) Like Khemir, Alem perceives the desert as the ideal place for acquiring spiritual knowledge, and both perceive it as facilitating spiritual advancement. Whereas Khemir’s reasons for this view lie in the way the desert comprises signs of the divine’s presence, thus assimilating spiritual knowledge to firasa, Alem attributes the desert’s spiritual character to its historical connection to the mystical. She affirms this conviction in Fatma, explaining that the spiritual knowledge is an inheritance of Al-Khidr\(^ {68}\) that is passed solely to a single desert tribe (87). Al-Khidr’s knowledge represents Alem’s view of the highest spiritual knowledge. This knowledge takes refuge among the desert tribes because of the social and ideological restrictions of urban civilisation. For Alem, the desert reflects an ideal space to approach spiritual knowledge.

The way Alem locates spirituality in the desert implies that the desert provides a space for women’s emancipation. The untamed spirituality of the Bedouin inhabitants of Najran generates a different view of gender relations. Prince Taray tells Fatma that, in their forty villages, women cannot be forced to live with men whom they do not love (101). Prince Taray, who fell in love with Fatma when he saw her in a dream years before her arrival, continues to pursue her discreetly in the desert and suffers greatly when she refuses his affection (81, 107). Despite his great longing for Fatma and his power over her, he abides by her decision, prompting a comparison between Taray—who respects Fatma—and Sajir, who constantly rapes her. More important is the position of Fatma, who recognizes that she is “serving a life sentence” by being married to Sajir but refuses to give in to her passion for the Prince out of respect for the bond of marriage (81, 101). Alem opts to assert the individual sense of morality Fatma exhibits as a spiritual woman, thus

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\(^{66}\) In Pilgrims of Love: The Anthropology of a Global Sufi Cult (2003), Pnina Werbner writes that some Sufi schools understand Hajj as a journey through time: “Starting from Mina, the place of Abrahamic sacrifice, on the eighth day of the month of Hajj, the pilgrims are moved back in time on the ninth day at the valley of Arafat, which is both the beginning and end of time” (104). The author explains the historical significance of the mountain as follows: “Thus I was told by a Qadiri khalifa . . . ‘we believe that when Adam and Hava [Eve] were sent down to earth they met . . . at the Mountain of Mercy at Arafat’” (104).

\(^{67}\) Alem seems to defend Sufism against claims such as those made by Ernst Gellner, who places civilisation in the confines of the metropoles and accuses rural Sufism of ignorance (Muslim Society 57)

\(^{68}\) Al-Khidr is referred to in the Qur’an as having unique wisdom (18: 65-82).
subverting patriarchal claims that moral discipline requires the guardianship of male patriarchs.

The utilisation of the ‘abaya in Fatma enriches the narrative on many levels. In addition to the previous complication of individual and collective morality, it questions the limits of Fatma’s mystical power. Alem depicts the many practical influences of Fatma’s mystical experience, such as her artistic skill in farming the snakes, her intellectual development and her—or more precisely her body’s—capacity to deter Sajir. However, Fatma is unable to rebel against wearing the ‘abaya. In the street, she takes it off briefly before wearing it again when her “spark of defiance faded” (2). Resistance against the collective patriarchal system is not feasible for an individual, especially if this individual is a woman. The depiction of the ‘abaya serves as a delineation of Fatma’s situation in both the mystical and profane worlds. However, this delineation, accomplished through the depiction of the complex function of the ‘abaya, is barely noticeable due to the extent to which the mystical is interconnected with the profane in Alem’s novel.

Alem does not attempt to confine the results of the mystical experience to the mystical realm but rather allows the mystical to seep into the profane. This reflects her resistance to ideological restrictions, an expression of her personal belief in wahdat al-wujūd that subverts all boundaries and a remnant of the impact of de Beauvoir’s feminism, which regards the agentic mystical experience as agentic when it has a practical impact on the profane.

6. Conclusion:

Alem’s feminist quest insinuates an intellectual view of spirituality. Knowledge is asserted as a fundamental basis of agentive mysticism, leading Alem to complicate issues of patriarchal hierarchy over the textual tradition. The assertion on practices, such as veiling, as a core measure of religiosiity in Wahhabism and other scholastic Islamic ideologies is perceived by Alem as facilitating a gendered hierarchy. The examination of two of her novels reveals that Alem’s resistance to ideological restrictions comprises a process of diffusing the mystical into the profane. Alem’s Fatma is profoundly subversive of the religious hierarchy promoted by Wahhabism. As the study of Fatma makes explicit, the impact of mysticism may channel itself through a process of a bodily transmutation, complicating the patriarchal conception of the feminine body and the textual interpretation oriented by such conceptions. Masking the feminine body with the ‘abaya is impossible when this body is capable of resisting all physical constraints and labels.
From such a view of the interconnection of the profane and the mystical, Alem’s feminist writings seem to urge a reconception of the feminine body as a hallmark of honour. In My Thousand, Jummo’s mysticism is hindered due to patriarchal preoccupation with honour. Jummo fails to achieve agency because her knowledge of the mystical is distorted by her society. In turn, the mystical experiences of Hamida Khaja and Fatma are agentive because their mystical knowledge is intact. Fatma’s relationship with Noor is not oriented by socially gendered views of the mystical. Her experience of the mystical is an informed, transcendental one. In this way, Alem’s perspective of epistemological hierarchy is a feminist one. Her writing subverts the normative view of male ideological supremacy. The representation of the male characters, such as Sajir, as spiritually and ideologically lacking shows that patriarchal power over religious knowledge is not functional. Conversely, the female characters’ access to the mystical is completely individualistic and can transgress the control of the patriarchs when accommodated with textual and internal spiritual knowledge.

Alem’s feminist novels introduce a particular view of autonomy as experienced within both the mystical and the profane. Mystical autonomy, such as that depicted in Fatma, connotes a form of eschatological agency that is similar to Khemir’s in that death is represented as a celebratory moment of return and unification. Khemir’s representation of eschatological agency complements his representation of the theophany, Noor, who functions as a bridge between the profane and the mystical. Khemir does not seem to reject Sufi views of women as embodiments of either dhat or nafs; however, his depiction centralises the spiritual and agentive image of women. His depiction of the theophany affirms that he shares Alem’s view that the gendered duality is anything but accurate. Khemir’s and Alem’s assertion of the necessity of intuitional knowledge for women’s agency shows that Sufism is not only a knowledge-based school but that it promotes an individualistic view of agency. Privatising religiosity is at the core of Khemir’s and Alem’s political dissent, which is stimulated by their rejection of a monolithic ideology.
Conclusion

This study has examined selected literary and cinematic works for articulations of Sufi impact on agency within the postcolonial context. The works of Aboulela, Khemir and Alem involve two different Sufi affiliations. Sufism is found to exercise a profound impact on the authors’ ontological perspectives on humans and the universe, as well as their epistemological standpoints on textual traditions and spiritual contemplation. Aboulela’s Sufism advocates a complete abidance by textual traditions and associates agency with the moral well-being of the community rather than the individual. Ibn ‘Arabi’s Sufism, to which Alem and Khemir belong, promotes an individualistic interpretation of sacred texts as paving the way for a similarly individualistic form of agency. Such approaches introduce alternative perspectives of gender relations. By examining religious agency from a Sufi perspective, this study deconstructs typical scholastic engagements with textual traditions that situate women as inferior to collective and male religiosity. Through that deconstruction, this study reconceptualises gender classifications and the relationship of women with the Divine. This, in turn, enables an alternative framework of engaging with the postcolonial situation of Muslim women within which such complex issues as westernisation, terrorism, migration, nation-states, misogyny, political Islam and authoritarianism can be questioned audaciously. Sufi spiritualisation of the universe and of its inhabitants sheds an innovative light on these issues, facilitating a rejection of their unjust influence on women’s agency.

By juxtaposing Islamic feminism and Sufism as theoretical frameworks for the discussion of the artistic works under scrutiny, this study centralises writing as a form of resistance to normative ideological powers, such as patriarchal readings of sacred texts. Sufism enables resistance to patriarchal political power over sacred texts by initiating alternative narrative systems. As this study has made clear, this normativity has also been exercised by literary critics who have classified Sufi literature as a response to Magical Realism. The reduction of Sufi literature to a category that fits the standards of Magical Realism has marginalised faith because of the equation of mysticism with myths. A critical reading of the artistic works reveals that faith is a stimulating force that shapes the authors’ and filmmaker’s perspectives of the world. It spiritualises their relationship to literature and cinematography, which enables them to express spiritual struggles for agency. Magical Realism does not offer this spiritual space in the same way that Sufism does.
The artistic works examined in this thesis articulate in different contexts women’s struggles for agency. Aboulela’s fiction tackles this struggle from a diasporic space, as her characters are Muslim migrants to the West. This influenced these characters’ agency. Natasha’s westernisation and the otherness she experiences as she migrates to the West reflect the way postcolonial subjects suffer from an ambivalent relationship to the former coloniser. The experience of Natasha with the Western educational system and her failed endeavour to integrate are depicted by Aboulela as complicating her relationship to Islam. That is, she refuses religion because it essentialises her otherness to the West and objectifies her in Western ideological structures as a postcolonial subject. This ambivalent position of the diasporic intellectual, displaced from postcolonial space, is explained by Spivak as follows: ‘The so-called marginal student, claiming validation, is being taught . . . speaking for oneself, which is then, in fact, working precisely to contain the ones whom this person is supposed to represent’ (Outside 9). Aboulela depicts cosmopolitan spirituality as a solution that can heal Natasha’s sense of exile and provide her with confidence to approach history from a spiritual perspective. Furthermore, this spirituality assists Malak to overcome her longing for Chechnya. Malak is another exemplar of the diasporic women whose sense of exile shaped their religious agency. Cosmopolitan spirituality, for Aboulela, offers a transcendental sense of identity because it connects exiled postcolonial subjects in the West to one another and to their past. It is an opposite to the dogmatic religious structure which Aboulela depicts as predominant in the postcolonial world. That dogmatism results in a rigid perspective on religion that focuses on physical practices. For Aboulela, this rigidity is interconnected with the cultural adaptation of religion that infuses negative elements such as misogyny into religion.

The present study has examined Sufi perspectives on gender, which range from a negation of gender classifications to the elevation of women to divine-like beings. These perspectives comprise valuable resources for Sufi women’s struggle for agency. Ibn ‘Arabi’s Sufism proposes an alternative view of individuality based on the perspective that spirituality and spiritual knowledge produce a direct connection to the divine. However, the authors’ and cinematic director’s standpoints on textual traditions and their social or ideological context has complicated the application of these views in the profane. Sachiko Murata’s discussion in her book The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought (1992) can explicate this issue further. She argues that Sufi views of gender, formulated within a cosmological and mystical space, are neatly delineated from the Islamic legal system, which regulates gender relations in the social profane space (177). For her, this means that the spiritual empowerment of Sufism is not related to social empowerment. Murata refers to patriarchy as an example of this separation of the spiritual
and social empowerment that is refused in Ibn ‘Arabi’s Sufism as a risky egoistic tendency: “Attributing yang qualities to oneself is perilous because all yang qualities belong by right to God” (177-8). However, the misogynistic oppression of women as inferior to men, presumably stated as such by legislation of qiwamah, is not rebuked in Ibn ‘Arabi’s philosophy. This, for Murata, creates a tension between an abstract sense of empowerment and the practical gender relations within Sufism, a tension that is deeply associated with Sufism’s refusal to accept the traditional interpretation of texts and its prioritising an individualistic search for knowledge.

However, as the writers’ and cinematic director’s work has demonstrated, there are different Sufi engagements with textual traditions and the legal system inferred from them. The separation indicated by Murata is found to exist in Khemir’s ideology, in which there are two levels of women’s representation: the mystical and abstract theophany and the profane, victimised woman. The gap between genders in the two realms is apparent in the way Noor’s spirituality does not allow her to travel without assuming a male identity. A feminist reflection on this instance reveals that Noor’s unification with her beloved Zaid results in the annihilation of her femininity and hence her gender-neutral appearance at the final gathering. Noor’s spiritual empowerment is detached from the profane and does not permit her to resist patriarchal rules. The mystical experience facilitates Noor’s travel by altering her identity to abide by the patriarchs’ restrictions, but the gendered restrictions on travel remain intact. Representing the masculine viewpoint of the theophany, Khemir’s positive representation of women remains relevant to their function in male spirituality. This representation does not counteract the negative view of women as lustful and immoral, nor the patriarchal use of this view to oppress women.

Sufi ideology, as Alem’s discourse attests, empowers women to challenge authoritarian oppression. Alem refers to the mystical as a resource for contesting social gendered views. Her enactment of the transmutation in Fatma and the mystical sexual relations in My Thousand is not confined to the mystical. Both have practical results in the profane. Alem’s depiction of the mystical-profane interaction in women’s agentic experience is backed by her social context, exhibiting a collective belief in the mystical. This facilitates Alem’s contestation of sociocultural imagination regarding women by using a narrative strategy that frequently merges both realms, thus giving her narrative of mystical experiences realistic justifications. That is, Alem’s depiction of the mystical is informed by her engagement with common social representations of the mystical. For instance, as chapter 5 has elucidated, Fatma’s bodily transmutation can be read as a reflection of Sajir’s own view of women as evil. The mystical sexual relationship Jummo
experiences, and its impact on her virginity, is only meaningful because her Sufi society
genders the mystical. Alem discusses social misogyny by using mystical imagination, in
which women are capable of transgressing social taboos and restrictions. The mystical-
profane interaction is also present in Alem’s depiction of Fatma’s cultivation of positive
attributes from her mystical experience, such as the unravelling of her Sufi knowledge and
capacity to craftily revive the snake farm. As chapter 5 has clarified, within Alem’s
feminist discourse, women’s mysticism can only be agentic if it has a practical impact on
their profane, an impact that may be limited by patriarchal restrictions, such as Fatma’s
inability to permanently discard her ‘abaya.

Aboulela’s position is different because her Sufi discourse is not detached from
textual traditions. The separation between mystical and profane gender relations in relation
to her view of qiwamah is established in chapter 3. Due to the influence of scholastic and
practical Sufism, her feminist discourse does not seek a liberation from the hierarchical
gender relations implied by qiwamah. It attempts to engage with the problem of the
misogyny that surfaces in the absence of just and spiritual qiwamah. Aboulela’s fiction
locates supportive forms of patriarchy in the past and the mystical realms but not in the
present due to the troublesome postcolonial situation. Her conception of agency is not at
odds with Shari’a, but with the postcolonial present that permits the rise of social, rather
than religious, conceptions of gender relations. This is why ideal forms of patriarchy reside
in the mystical and the past and are not attainable in the present. Aboulela sees secular
humanism as hindering the full application of Shari’a, which would favour women’s
agency. Unlike Khemir and Alem, Aboulela’s discourse is inclined towards Shari’a and
represents the gap between the mystical and the profane as the result of secular modernity
and its propagation of a materialistic civilisation. The artists’ literary and cinematic styles
reflect their views of the relationship between the mystical and the profane. Aboulela’s
novels offer realistic and detailed depictions of the characters’ daily struggles for agency.
Alem’s and Khemir’s styles are dominated by elusive narration, complex symbolism and,
in the case of Bab’Aziz, profoundly meaningful visual elements.

Overall, Sufi authors’ engagement with profane gender relations is complex and
cannot be determined without identifying the Sufi ideology’s relation to textual traditions
as well as the social reality from which the author writes. Alem’s resistance to patriarchy,
for instance, impels her to write in a unique literary style that associates Sufism with
Western feminist ideologies. For her, Sufism liberates women because it offers them
independent ideological resources. Her literary style epitomises this ideological liberty,
which refuses to be contained in one framework or another. Alem’s narrative depicts two
interrelated worlds, one where women are oppressed and another where they represent
divine powers. For Alem, the permeation of the mystical into the profane assists in
women’s emancipation. This interaction is an essential part of Alem’s feminist discourse.

Furthermore, the mystical is not simply an ideological resource but is related to the
eschatological convictions of the authors. The authors’ writings of the past and the future
are integral to this mystical dimension. The writings and film discussed here engage with
the past by employing Sufism to fulfil two historical religious views. These are stated in
chapter 2, but a reminder could be helpful at this point. First, Quranic tradition encourages
the contemplation of historical signs as a main resource of spiritual knowledge. Second,
worldly life is finite, and its termination will be triggered by an apocalypse. These two
aspects have a deep influence on the way history has been approached by this trio of
authors. These factors enhance the sense of the temporality of the profane life. The
meanings of agency introduced by Aboulela, Khemir and Alem revolve around these two
historical aspects in various ways and directions. The temporality of the profane stimulates
the depiction of the spiritual endeavour as a form of journey that echoes the mystic’s view
of life as a path to God. The unravelling of various agentic patterns around the motif of
journeying shows the writers’ and cinematic director’s various eschatological perceptions.

For Aboulela, agency results from seeking purification and forgiveness. Journeying
for her provides a more transparent view of life and its anticipated termination. Perceiving
profane life in this manner shapes Aboulela’s reaction to the postcolonial ideological
predicament. The ideological predicament under which postcolonial subjects suffer is
associated, in her characterisation of Natasha, with a spiritual exile. In Aboulela’s
narratives, the profane present life falls into a chasm between the precolonial Islamic past
and the mystical future. It is a space of struggle, exile and suffering, and only in the
eschatological will this be resolved.

The Kindness and Minaret depict a present in which the spiritual destination is not
reached but is recognised and approached via a Sufi journeying and Hajj, respectively.
This equation between the profane postcolonial present and the state of the Sufi traveller
facilitates the realisation of the eschatological dimension of religious agency. For
Aboulela, the postcolonial struggle for agency is unattainable in the present without the aid
of a religious history that recognises the eschatological aim. As long as the profane is
under siege by secular modernity, agency cannot be fulfilled there. Aboulela’s adoption of
the mystical time complicates historicity by allowing the historicising of mystical
experiences. Her historical rewriting poses questions about the alleged objective and
rational aspects of history. Secular humanism, for Aboulela, diverts the religious to the
margins of modern daily life because of its ability to make agency and empowerment fully available in the profane.

Khemir’s depiction of the motif of journeying makes explicit the view of life as existing between two mystical unifications with the divine, one prior to birth and one after death. Like Aboulela, he links the spiritual exile from mystical unification to that of the postcolonial migrants. Khemir’s agentic journeying is twofold: a search for the divine within the subject and a re-engagement with Islamic past civilisations. Directing their contemplative gaze inward, the travellers can critically reflect on their spiritual state and embark on an endeavour to annihilate the ego to pave the way for unification. They do not have a ready knowledge of their way, and only through this inward reflection can they see it. It is via their egoless and insightful spirituality as well as critical reflection on existing knowledge that those subjects can revive the lost civilisations. Ready mapping of the journey does not assist in this self-discovery; similarly, the classical interpretations of textual traditions are not as relevant to modern travellers’ contexts and cannot revive lost civilisations. In this way, the past provides a new lens through which the story unravels. However, the new story does not have to be a prototype of the past one but may instead be a continuation of it.

Alem refers to past or futuristic events chronicled in textual traditions to represent her opinion about the contemporary situation. This facilitates a deep perception of the messages intended by the narration of these events. For Alem, the past, just like the future, is not detached from the present because they both exist in the mystical. The journeying through the mystical permits crossing of the boundaries of time and, as Fatma shows, can prevent past evils from seeping into the present. The future, in the form of the apocalypse, for instance, can be invoked to support the spiritual subject’s struggle to defy evil and achieve agency. Alem uses the legend of the River Lar to depict the advent of The Day of Resurrection as a foreseeable event. Further engaging with Alem’s texts produces another level of journeying that includes the reader in the search for the divine. Perceiving Alem’s messages is not an easy affair. Readers need to develop their own insights to decode these messages and to see through the text their own troubles and hardships. This perception cannot be maintained without patience, engagement and assertiveness. Alem’s My Thousand and Fatma train readers to perceive that approaching the truth requires sacrificing fixed mindsets, especially those that create polarising and monolithic judgments of right and wrong or good and evil. Grasping the intended meaning is equivocal to arrival at the spiritual destination, not necessarily due to the readers’ embrace of Alem’s Sufi conviction but because their tolerance and insight have been cultivated. Alem’s literary
texts actualise her approach to knowledge as a source of agency, and the difficulty of reading these texts reflects the difficulty of achieving agency. The text, literary or religious, is never able to provide an easy way to women’s salvation because it is through maintaining the core message, not the literal meaning, that women can defend themselves against patriarchy. Like Khemir, Alem asserts the crucial role of insightful reading of the text. This approach centralises the human in controversies over the text and its meaning, producing a counterreaction to authoritarian readings.

Espoused with inward reflection, neither the reading nor the return to the past are detached from the present, nor are they reduced to discourses of idealism or victimisation. Such a critical, egoless engagement is contrary to fundamentalist orientations that strive to advocate their conviction of self-righteousness. The Sufi return to the past can lead to the contestation of the fundamentalist tenets that derive their ideologies from selective historical arguments and incidents. In this regard, as famously and continually acknowledged, Sufism represents a counteraction of fundamentalism. Its stress on the egoless view of the universe facilitates recognition of the heterogeneity of spiritual paths. Reflecting on the temporality of the profane within this context does not produce a terrorist camp expediting themselves towards heaven with suicide weapons, but a compassionate and humble response. Sufism stresses the evils of egoistic engagement with political affairs.

The return to the past is complicated by fundamental idealists who, recognising it as a source for contesting secular modernity, revive fragments of it to enhance their monolithic views of women. Through subjectivity and selectivity, the past can support any desired perspective. It has been an aim of this study to examine critically both the past that has been reflected upon and the present struggle that has stimulated that reflection. It is evident that the return to the past within the contemporary Muslim world is motivated by ideological and political factors. The past provides a wealth of experiences that facilitate a perception of the individual’s position within the aggression that inhabits the present. Sufism provides the hope that, through its lens, a promisingly heterogeneous, individualistic and tolerant past can be emulated.

Moreover, as this study has validated, the impact of political fundamentalism on women’s agency is crucial. Women’s rights in the Middle East and North Africa are significantly influenced by the powerful presence of political Islam and authoritarianism. As Abou El Fadl’s argument in chapter 1 has established, the outcome of feminist debates is determined by the profound conviction that women’s rights constitute a battlefield between Islam and the West. This view is continually actualised in women’s oppression
under the reign of political Islam, with its innately anti-Western agenda. The alleged religious denial of the individual’s rights in favour of the community is used to legitimise women’s oppression in the name of religion. Proponents of political Islam can easily label any feminist movement as secular, westernised and a participant in an anti-Islamic conspiracy.

The rooted existence of political Islam in the area contributes to the lack of serious critical engagement with individualism within socio-religious studies. Scholars who engage with the latter domain, such as Mahmood and Asad, formulate conceptions that suit these parties. They tackle individuality cautiously due to their belief that individuality and free will are opposed to the religious perspective of al-qadhaa’ wa’ alqadar, or fate, according to which humans’ actions are already decided and registered by God. Mahmood equates agency with endurance in her argument that the individual’s subjectivity, created by various power relations, leads the individual to perceive agency within the space made possible by these power relations. Asad’s argument that agency is connected to virtuous or purifying pain lends positive meaning to penalties. The problem with this embrace of pain, endurance and penalties is that it limits agency to an unpleasant endeavour undertaken by the individual to fulfil his or her duties. Within this mindset, individuals’ rights are not discussed as playing a role in agency.

The disparity between religious and modern humanism should not be considered separately from the authoritarian streams directing the political and ideological situations of the Middle East. At this point, it is useful to question the rationalisation of agency as connected to religious penalties with regard to the individual’s position implied by these legislations. The application of penalties involves a declaration of the punished subject’s full responsibility for the undertaken act. This implies, if only partially, a recognition of the individual’s independence and free will. It is because of this recognition that the individual is perceived as deserving of worldly or eschatological rewards or punishments. Although collective moral responsibility prioritises the society’s will over that of the individual, the legal system and eschatological conviction promoted by this responsibility is individualistic. However, this individualism is confined to the subject’s duties and not his or her rights. Within this context, a pro-faith development of religious humanism and women’s individuality will continue to be dismissed as subordinate to social welfare. This, therefore, perpetuates the alleged religious approval of political authoritarianism and makes religious agency no more than an oxymoron. With the absence of productive Islamic scholarship on the issue of individuality, agentic patterns as discussed by Islamic
scholars and feminists do not represent agency in the contemporary sense of the word without referring to the secular conceptualisation.

The authors studied here tackle the political in different ways. Aboulela depicts Shamil’s reign positively and differentiates it from modern fundamentalism. For her, there is no necessary detachment between religion and politics, a juxtaposition that is conditioned by a spiritually just practice. The study of historical Sufism ascertains that the past understanding of the term jihad is completely different from the contemporary one. Involving a spiritual struggle, as Aboulela’s narrative makes clear, the historical understanding reflects resisting personal desires that can burden spirituality. Its military connotation is restricted to defending the spiritual orientation and its followers from enemy attacks. Shamil’s military life espoused a humble submission to the community’s will, complicating modern-day extremists’ assumptions of self-righteousness and ultimate authority over religion and its followers. Extremists’ allusion to this past is concerned with deriving a valid defence for their aggression. They revive a single side of the struggle without comprehensively investigating the social, political and ideological contexts of that struggle. Khemir’s and Alem’s discourses, in contrast, do not encourage the association of religion with politics, as it enables control over religiosity and does not permit adequate space for heterogeneity. The political power will most likely enforce its own perspective of the “truth” and of the approved version of religiosity, which can facilitate the oppression of those who pose a threat to this religiosity, such as women. Khemir’s and Alem’s perspectives on the variety of paths to the truth encourage resisting such control as authoritarian, without negotiation. Khemir discusses terrorist violence, depicting Sufism as a resource to thwart terrorism.

In the present day, the turmoil in the Middle East and North Africa asserts the importance of reflective engagements with the past and textual traditions. Violence is now resistant to any attempts to contain or even describe it, due to its almost unprecedented extremity and the irrational discursive ways its agents affirm and legitimise their positions. This violence alters accepted power relations because its victims are not only individuals of minority religious affiliations but also those who belong to religious majorities and share core beliefs with their executioners. Religious texts are recited equally in political committees and terrorist declarations to validate and emphasise completely different viewpoints, but they contribute in the same way to the cycle of violence. Whether these carefully selected textual fragments require a contemporary interpretation is of no concern to these parties because they continue to serve the desired end. Most certainly, the textual traditions that allegedly legitimise enslaving Yazidi women (2014), burning alive the
Jordanian pilot Muath Al-Kasasbeh (1988-2015), demolishing the 2,000-year-old temple of Bel in Palmyra (2015) as well as the many other brutal propaganda crimes committed by the terrorist militias of Daesh⁶⁹ are the same ones declared responsible for the mass-murder of Syrian and Iraqi civilians during battles led by militants and national armies in both countries. These texts are reiterated time and again in almost every slaughter, bombing and shooting in proximity that, although not initiated by the so-called “Arab Spring,” were heightened by its advent. They are, above all, the same texts sacralised by the majority of Muslim individuals, inside and outside this afflicted area of the world, who coexist peacefully despite their different interpretations of the texts. This majority refers to the same texts in their daily lives for laws and motivations that have prolific humane and charitable impact. Among these people, there are women who continue to perceive in these texts a guide that supports their search for agency. As this study of Sufi works has proved, religion does not create violence, misogyny and oppression without the egoistic and absolutist mindsets within which the religious discourse is reproduced.

⁶⁹ Dawla Al-Islamiyah [fi] Al-Iraq [wa] Al-Sham, meaning “the so-called Islamic state.”
Appendix: Interview with Leila Aboulela

- M.A.: You lived in Khartoum, London, Aberdeen, Indonesia and Abu Dhabi. Do you think that different cities can influence the spiritual experience in different ways?

L.A.: Every place has its ambiance and mood. I was struck by how atmospheric Indonesia was, in that sense, it reminded me of Khartoum. The observations that the character Badr in Lyrics Alley (page 60) makes about praying in Sudan would also apply to Indonesia. “He concluded that in Sudan, the barriers between the human and spirit worlds were thin…..”

- M.A.: Where did you acquire your interest in Sufism?

L.A.: Islam was introduced in Sudan peacefully by the Sufis from North Africa. They did not conquer the country by force and impose Islamic rule. Instead, they traded and intermarried. So, growing up in Sudan the Islam I saw around me was one that was heavily influenced by Sufism. However, the change of government in 1989 brought in a more ‘modern’, hard-line interpretation of Islam. The coup was supported by the Muslim Brotherhood who were not well disposed towards Sufism. However by then I had already left Sudan - I left in 1987. Over time, the influence of traditional Sufism in Sudan has weakened. But it was certainly prevalent when I was growing up and although I belonged to a fairly liberal, Westernized family, I felt it all around me. During my time in the University of Khartoum I started reading Sufi literature such as Al Ghazali’s Revival and others.

- M.A.: In Minaret the spiritual characters Najwa and Tamer show relative weakness. Tamer was immature, and Najwa was vulnerable to Anwar, whereas the Westernised Anwar and Lamya were intelligent, outspoken and successful in their careers. What do you attribute such portrayals to? Are they spiritual and not fit for modern life with all its complexities and materialism? Or is there something else?

L.A.: This is a valid interpretation of the characters though not one I deliberately intended. Some readers see Tamer and Najwa as the ‘good and religious’ characters while Anwar and Lamya are ‘secular and evil.’ For me, it is important that the characters are rounded. That they feel real and not fake. If Najwa was an ideal person, the novel would collapse into being something that I don’t want it to be i.e. didactic and preachy.

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70 This interview is undertaken by email at an early stage of my study of Aboulela’s texts.
• M.A.: In many cases, you mentioned polygamy as a positive option, sometimes as a promise of a good life for women. Do you think polygamy can be a choice for women in the modern day?
L.A.: Not an ideal choice, certainly. But it can be a better alternative to the positon of mistress or girlfriend to a married man who is constantly promising to divorce his wife but never does.

• M.A.: In your work, there is a relationship between history and Sufism, which is emphasised in The Kindness of Enemies. Do you think a return to history is necessary for Muslims nowadays? If yes, why?
L.A.: Looking at history in order to understand the present is necessary for everyone, not only Muslims. It shows us that our problems and challenges are not necessarily unique. Previous generations have also faced these difficulties. We can learn from their experiences and we can find comfort in not being alone.

• M.A.: In The Kindness of Enemies, you portrayed a very interesting approach to Sufism as scholarly and politically active. What is your reasoning for this?
L.A.: I was being true to the historical facts. I wanted to present the story from the point of view of Imam Shamil and how he understood Sufism, Islam and jihad.

• M.A.: ‘Days Rotate’ showcases your early representation of Sufism. What urged you to write about a spiritual utopia?
L.A.: Early in my career, I was trying to get a collection of short stories published and one of the rejection letters from a major publisher stated that all my stories were ‘one voice and one situation.’ So I wrote Days Rotate deliberately so that I could prove to myself that I could write in a very different style and on a very different subject matter.

• M.A.: Your spiritual characters – Sammar, Najwa, Tamer, Shamil, Malak and Oz – experienced different forms of suffering. It seems to me that there is a connection between your representation of these characters and Talal Asad’s perspective on pain as ‘agentive’ (Formations, 2003). Do you think there is a connection between pain and spirituality?
L.A.: I am not familiar with Talal Asad’s work. Pain, loss and failure humble us and make us feel helpless. This in turn can make us appreciate/acknowledge the strength of Allah Almighty and make us more receptive to spirituality and the acceptance of the Divine.

• M.A.: You provide an abundant description of the character of Imam Shamil. Did you find an adequate historical account of his life and personality? To what extent did you rely on historical facts when writing the novel?
L.A.: I relied on the sources I mentioned in my Acknowledgment and my imagination.

- M.A.: Your portrayal of the characters of Anna and Jamaleldin is very interesting, particularly their exile, which allows them to understand and sympathise with both sides of the struggle. Can you elaborate on this?

L.A.: Jamaleldin is only eight years old when he is taken from his home and adopted by the Tsar. Although his childhood memories are vivid, he becomes immersed in Russian culture and slowly loses his connection to his homeland. As time goes by, he gives us hope that his father will ever rescue him and he becomes more and more loyal to Russia. It is a shock when his father is finally able to ransom him back to the Caucasus and Jamaleldin, naturally, is reluctant to abandon his career in the Russian army and return to his tribe. Once he does return though, he cannot help but be moved by the welcome he receives and the deep family bonds that are revived. Although he tries to adjust, he finds that he cannot. And his ending is tragic.

Anna is different in that she is older and more established when she is kidnapped. She finds herself drawn to the charisma of Imam Shamil and fascinated by the lives of his wives, but she eventually comes to her senses and realizes that her future and loyalty are to her husband.


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