

## INTERROGATING THE DILEMMA OF MUSLIM IMMIGRANTS' CULTURAL INTEGRATION IN LEILA ABOULELA'S MINARET AND LAILA LALAMI'S THE OTHER AMERICANS

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### **Abstract**

For Muslim immigrants residing in a culturally disparate reality, maintaining the 'purity' of their 'Muslimness' is rather burdensome as well as controversial given the nature of the new receiving culture in one part; and due to the 'mismatch' lying between some Muslim immigrants and their 'deformed' perception of Islam as faith in another. This paper investigates the intricacies of the Muslim immigrants' integration process in the Western culture/cultures, given they carry a cultural load drastically non-identical with the Western secular reality. More particularly, it qualitatively looks into the cultural in-betweenness of the Muslim immigrants as regards their way of life in the West in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* and Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans*. Through these two literary samples, thus, this paper seeks to analyse some dimensions of the 'hegemony' the Western culture exerts on this minority, discuss whether or not these immigrants can preserve their identity despite such cultural pressure; and also assess their current and future horizons of their integration into this distinct Western cultural environment.

**Key words:** Integration; Cultural in-Betweenness; Hegemony; Religiosity, Muslimness; Islamophobia; Secularism.

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## Introduction

As history has drastically changed the destiny of continents, the USA and Europe, in particular, have been the destination of immigrants belonging to many different ethnicities and cultures. As regards the Muslim immigrants, they have constituted the center of research attention in America, but have been so mainly in Europe (Cesari, 2009) during the last three decades. However, Muslim immigrants have gained significant attention in the American research academia since the events of 9/11 (Cesari, 2009).

For the Western culture to have 'meaning,' it promptly needs its Other. The Other in the West composes of the various minorities/communities which set up its general cultural mosaic: the Muslim immigrants' minority as a case in point. Immigrants constitute an added value to the Western culture in the sense that they offer it an opportunity to prosper through 'difference.' The latter, Stuart Hall (ed., 1997) argues, "matters because it is essential to [cultural] meaning; without it meaning could not exist" (p 234). Thus, it is the difference between the Western national and the immigrants which carries meaning. Hall (ed., 1997) stretches this idea by saying that "we know what it is to be 'British,' not only because of certain characteristics, but also because we can mark its 'difference' from its 'others'" (pp 234-235). Cultures, therefore, enrich themselves by embracing the 'different' Other. "Meaning," Hall (ed., 1997) continues, "depends on the difference between the opposites" (p 235). One of the crucial denominators of the Muslim immigrants' culture, among others, is religion. This study seeks to divulge the extent to which these immigrants can preserve their Muslim identity within the Western cultural domineering space.

As far as Muslim immigrants' integration is concerned, participation in both political and civic activities, numerous empirical studies (e.g. Cesari, 2013; Duran, 2002; Pipes, 1990; Peach, 1995; Haddad, 2002; Anwar, 2008; etc) have been conducted to clarify the rates of Muslims' integration in the Western societies. However, none of these studies has shown that Muslims' integration in these societies is 'rhizomatic' – "without roots" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p 15). That is, the immigrants' destinies in the countries they relocate to are formless, unpredictable, non-duplicative, variable, inconsistent and multifarious. Peucker (2018), in this regard, interrogates the possible, or denial, reconciliatory citizenship of Muslim immigrants (and the Muslim community in general): "[i]s there any empirical evidence that suggest that Muslims feel discouraged or prohibited by their faith to actively perform their democratic citizenship? Or does Islamic religiosity have no, or possibly even positive, effects on their volunteering in civil society and their political participation?" (p 3). Peucker believes that it is impossible to arrive to a finite answer to these questions because of the rhizomatic nature of the Muslim immigrants' conditions in the Western societies. In this vein, he writes: "[g]iven the diversity of Muslim communities in the West and the complexities of Islamic doctrines, sects, schools of thought and, above all, Muslims' individual Islamic spirituality, it seems, however, unfeasible to ultimately answer these questions once and for all" (Peucker, 2018, p 3).

This paper qualitatively negotiates the Muslim immigrants' presence in the Western countries, their contentious cultural meeting with the Western Other and the repercussions of such cultural intersection upon the Muslims' identity on one part and their religiosity on the Other. Also, it seeks to shed more lights on the cultural obstacles Muslim immigrants do encounter after they relocate to a new culture drastically considered to be different from the culture they constitute a part of; hence producing a hybrid cultural space which power relations play a crucial role in that a culture presides on the other. Such dilemmas are going to be explored through Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005) and Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans* (2019).

## Muslim Immigrants' Minority in the West

At issue and crucial to the main concern of this study is the ideological manner the Western countries deal with the issue of minorities. It is likely that within any multicultural culture of any country, there exist different minorities next to the mainstream of any given community. Such mainstream cultures, significantly, tend to be massively different in the

way each culture treats its minorities. In this regard, it is important to state that in the multi-cultural West, the countries tend to weigh their relationships with their correspondent minorities depending on how these minorities comply with the conditions already engineered by the mainstream culture of any state. What follows is that dealing with the cultural minorities is first and foremost a concern of these countries as *nation-states*. In this context, it is crucial to delve into the way Muslim minorities in the West are treated compared to other minorities. However, it is not a pivotal concern of this paper to trace, in detail, the entire spectra of minorities which live in the West. Yet, it is of paramount importance to stress that the social safety and harmony of any given state necessitates non-discrimination against any cultural component; hence the need for justice and neutrality from the state. In this regard, Parekh (1998) writes:

One might argue that in a culturally diverse society the state should be culturally neutral as otherwise it would end up preferring or enforcing one culture of life, thereby both treating other cultures unequally and subjecting them to unacceptable degree of moral coercion. The state should be a purely formal institution pursuing no substantial goals of its own and requiring more of its citizens than that they accept the established structure of authority and obey the law. Such a state give[s] citizens, including minorities, the maximum possible freedom to live the way they like and also ensures unity and cohesion. (p 1)

If there should be any interference from the state, it ought to be to enforce a law that governs all the cultural minorities so that it can maintain its ubiquitous sovereignty equally practiced on these minorities, including the people of the majority culture.

Nevertheless, given the significance of this issue to this research, it is worth mentioning that the West singles the Muslim minority out to treat it uniquely irrespective of the other minorities. In this vein, Soysal (1997) argues that “Alevism have gained greater institutional recognition than Sunni groups” (p 18). Why, then, Alevism is favoured over the Sunni Islam? First, the West is not blind about the intra-disputes existing among the different Muslim minorities. Second, it cannot do so without recognising that it can share more with Alevism than with Sunni Muslims. Soysal (1997) elaborates on this when he states that:

The fact that Alevism gains more welcome from the Western countries, Germany as a case in point, just because this ‘minority within the immigrant minority’ accepts to fully assimilate to the German culture without even partially dissociating itself from the German culture even at the level of some purely Islamic rituals such as eating *halal* food and wearing the headscarf and so forth. (pp 17-18)

This informs us an important idea about what kind of Islam the West approves of and begrudgingly tolerates. For example, “a bilingual brochure (German/Turkish) about discrimination against Alevism in Turkey was sent to the EU. The brochure presented Alevism as embodying modernity, tolerance, enlightenment, freedom, and rejecting fanaticism, fundamentalism and sharia” (Cesari, 2013, p 19). Muslim immigrants’ institutions should bear the responsibility of teaching the *imams* the culture of difference based on the tolerant and embracing teachings of the Islamic religion itself. What happens mostly, contrary to the current reality, is that the Western countries exploit this ‘empty space’ the authentic Muslim institutions could not fill in order to rather ‘prune’ the Muslim *imams*’ religious freedom according to the Western’s culture cherished agendas. Cesari (2013) writes:

It seems that in the majority situation, there is a greater independence of the religious institutions of the sending countries vis-à-vis the integration policies of the receiving countries. For example, in the case of the Catholic Church in the UK, integration strategies remain entirely under the jurisdiction of religious leaders, with no interference or guidance from the British state, whereas Muslim communities and their religious leaders are subjected to strict visa requirements and state control. The same seems true for Catholics in Germany. (p 21)

Cesari stresses here that the Western principles of secularism and religious plurality and equality end up being questionable, given that not all religions in the West enjoy the same privileges.

In this context, Derrida (Cherif, 2008) suggests a rather 'moderate' secularism for the Western countries to adopt in order for them to achieve a successful integration of the religious minorities:

I believe that today we need a concept of the secular that no longer has that sort of aggressive compulsion that it once had in France, in the moments of crisis between the State and religion. I believe that the secular today must be more rigorous with itself, more tolerant toward religious cultures and toward the possibility for religious practices to exist freely, unequivocally, and without confusion." (pp 50-51)

Derrida, hence, calls for a more humanistic secularism that is based on considering the Other as similar to the Self, thereby deserving equal treatment. To attain such embracing secularism, he also calls not only for 'dialogue with the Other,' for he considers that dialogue might be rather deceitful *per se*. He thus invites the West to initiate dialogue with its Other; a conversation which replaces ideology and pre-judgement with equality and humanism. To state it in Derrida's words,

I don't use the word 'dialogue' very much – its sometimes exploitative connotations are well known. I would call it 'speech addressed to the other recognised as other, recognised in his alterity.' This speech addressed to the other presupposes the freedom to say anything, on the horizon of a democracy to come that is not connected to the nation, the State, religion, which is not even connected to language. (Cherif, 2008, pp 44-45)

It is quite obvious here that Derrida cherishes the Other as crucially a different other who rather enriches the Self through his alterity. Derrida also strongly believes that no nation-state can claim its pure sovereignty. For him, there is no sovereignty as long as there is exclusion in a nation-state. It is a notion built on togetherness and sharing. Thus, it is indivisible. Derrida writes:

All the great theoreticians of sovereignty, whether it is Bodin or Hobbes, proposed, and no one up to now has questioned this definition, that sovereignty is indivisible, whether it be that of the monarch, the people, or the individual. Today, we must take into account the fact that sovereignty is to be shared, that it is divisible. There is no longer any pure sovereignty; there is no longer a pure sovereign nation-state. The world must therefore be recognised so that new divisions of sovereignty are put into place and so that relationships of techno-economic force enable this transformation of the law and of sovereignty. (Cherif, 2008, p 72)

Based on these founding claims, therefore, a strong sovereignty is the one which is established upon embracing all its components despite their discrepancies. The question posing itself in this regard is how can these cultural 'divisions' coexist side by side, without one taking over the other? There is here a need for an overarching system which is accepted by all these divisions. To achieve this purpose, Derrida puts forward the concept of 'democracy.' He thinks that every cultural division must assume its responsibility of preserving democracy and fulfilling its demands:

This [sovereignty based on equal divisions] passes through democracy, through the people, through each people's capacity to embrace democracy, to organise democracy while contesting, each in his or her place, each from his or her situation and unique contest, the theocratic authority that mutilates or subjugates democracy in any way. (Cherif, 2008, p 72)

In light of this argument, Muslim immigrants – given they constitute a cultural division besides others – assume the responsibility of building democracy as long as the latter is established on a non-discriminating and non-eclectic sovereignty.

Bhikhu Parekh is close to Jacques Derrida in his view of humanistic secularism that the latter upholds the rights of the cultural divisions to express themselves in an atmosphere which supports democracy. Parekh (1998) suggests a pluralist mode of integration for the state not to culturally exclude any cultural minority irrespective of its cultural 'weight' in the society. The concept of plurality is mainly based on inclusion and togetherness, as Parekh (1998) confirms: "we cannot obviously integrate 'them' so long as we remain 'we'; we must be loosened up to create a new common space in which 'they' can become part of a newly constituted 'we'" (p 3). However, to what extent the Self is ready to be 'loosened up' for the sake of embracing the Other? Parekh also believes that the state is accountable for preserving the privacy of the cultural minorities: "the state is a custodian of the society's way of life" (p 2). Otherwise, the dominant culture would intrude into that privacy and take control of what peculiarly belongs to the minority culture. So, the cultural indifference or '*lessez-faire*' policy serves only the dominant culture at the expense of the minority cultures (Parekh, 1998).

Parekh (1998) strikes a comparison between the communities on one hand, and the state on the other, in regard to the importance of culture to either side; the intersection point is culture:

All that deeply matters to them [i.e. minorities] – their customs, practices, values, sense of identity and historical continuity, norms of behaviour, patterns of family life, and so forth – are derived from their cultures. The state has no moral status, and its sole *raison d'être* is to uphold and nurture its constituent cultural communities. It is not a community of communities, for that it implies that it has an independent moral basis and its own distinct goals, but rather a union of communities, a bare framework within which they should be free to pursue their traditional ways of life and engage in necessary social, political and economic interactions. (p 4, italics in original)

The state, thus, is rather a guarantor of rights of all cultural divisions within a given society. It is not a community *per se*. It cannot exist without its subjects/minorities; which, in turn, cannot attain existence without culture. This implies that the state's duty is to maintain the equality of cultures of these communities, as long as it composes of a 'union of communities.' It must not, therefore, behave as the 'proprietor' of culture, for it is merely a 'bare framework' which rather organises the cultures of the distinct communities it carries within that framework.

### **Muslim Immigrants and modes of integration**

Integration is rhizomatic *per se*. Where it folds and unfolds is rather vague with regard to the immigrants' trajectory of mingling with the new culture they move to. According to Parekh, there exist modes of integration which the states adopt depending on the states' nature, history and people. First, the *assimilationist* mode of integration puts the blame on the immigrants as regards their successful or failed integration. Parekh (1998) mentions in this context that "if instead they [immigrants] insist on retaining their separate cultures, they should not complain if they are treated differently" (p 2). Second, the *proceduralist* mode of integration consists on giving the minorities the freedom to fully or partially embrace the majority culture, or even develop a third way peculiar to them; or merely be culturally introverted. Of course, as Parekh (1998) argues, the minorities have to "discharge their basic legal obligations to the state" (pp1-2).

Parekh (1998) adds that a 'half way' can be taken between proceduralism and assimilationism: the *bifurcationist* mode of integration. It is based on shared political culture, "including a common body of political values, practices and institutions, collective self-understanding and a broad view of national identity" (p 2), among the different cultural components of a given community. However, this shared culture necessitates the separation between the private and the public, as he explains: "the private, public distinction plays a

crucial role. The unity of the society is sought and located in the public realm, whereas diversity belongs to the private realm which includes not just the family but also neighbourhood and communal associations” (pp 2-3). Mostly, Parekh confirms, the advocates of this mode of integration are the liberals.

Parekh adds one more mode of integration – the *pluralist* – through which he criticises the bifurcationist mode. He claims that the latter “has two basic disadvantages. It places the community’s political culture beyond negotiation and revision, and expects minorities to become assimilated into it” (p 3). Consequently, this mode liberates the state at the expense of the minorities. What is more, the minorities would shun away this ‘usurped’ public culture, and thus, try to construct their own culture: they “would not be able to identify with it and offer it their whole-hearted support” (p 3). Worse, as Parekh contends, is that self-separation from the part of minorities would lead to their segregation and marginalisation.

Although Parekh cherishes more the pluralist mode of integration, he still believes that it carries a deficiency: it is incompatible with all societies. Yet, Parekh neglects a crucial denominator in regard to integration. Indeed, the society cannot decide for itself and by itself which mode of integration it should adopt and which to jettison. The society itself is composed of subjects, despite their differences, who are under the rule of a state which demarcates everything for them, including culture. Thus, Parekh (1998) is probably wrong when he mentions that

Although the pluralist model of integration is better than the rest, it cannot be held up as an ideal model for all societies. A society has to start from where it is and choose a model that best coheres with its history, traditions, self-understanding, moral and cultural resources, level of economic and political development, the nature, number and demands of its cultural minorities, and so forth. (p 12)

Parekh believes that it is up to the society to opt for the type of model which suits its nature, history and people. However, Parekh disregards the fact that it is rather the nation-state, not the society, which sets which mode of integration to be adopted. The case of Muslim immigrants is revealing in this regard. Muslim immigrants in the West, as many scholars account for (e.g. Lyons, 2014; Minkenberg, 2007), do smoothly co-exist with other cultural divisions. Yet, they face challenges rather with the prevailing culture. Yet, the state convinces the majority people of the society that these Muslims constitute a serious threat to the general culture, hence antagonising the Muslim immigrants. The societies, therefore, are not allotted the ability to choose how to live side by side with their culturally different Other. Rather, they are oriented and ideologically supervised in how to coexist with this Other by the state, which claims itself the representative and protector of the society.

Parekh (1998) indirectly emphasises this idea elsewhere in his significant chapter “Integrating Minorities,” that it is rather the state which rules the society and decides its cultural trajectories on behalf of it. He argues that whatever the state does, it cannot treat all the cultural divisions within the society it rules with justice. Therefore, he thinks that a morally just and coercion-free state is a mere illusion:

Since every law coerces those not sharing its underlying values, a morally non-coercive state is a fantasy. Some states can, of course, be morally less partisan and hence less coercive than others, but no state can be wholly free from moral bias and of the concomitant coercion. Even the most liberal state imposes such values as liberty, free speech and the equality of sexes, and races and hence coerces those totally opposed to them. (p 6)

Given this shapeless manner of treatment from the part of the state in regard to the cultural minorities, once again, it accounts for the rhizomatic realities. The idea here is that the modes of integration are distinct from one state to another; and within the same state they are

changeable according to the cultural, political or strategic agendas of that state. The West, therefore, is not a homogenous entity within which the immigrants are treated equally.

### **‘Othering’ Muslim immigrants in the West**

Numerous empirical studies confirm that Muslims with subjective religiosity (e.g. attending mosques; prayers) tend to participate in active citizenship (e.g. volunteering), the common good as well as political activities (electoral and non-electoral) (Peucker, 2018). Some crucial Muslim scholars, such as Tariq Ramadan, claim that even the Muslim faith does urge the Muslim community in the West to take part in these social and political activities as long as the aim is “to act for more justice within each sphere of social, economic and political life” and in order “to promote solidarity with all types of needy people” (qtd. in Peucker, 2018, pp 6-7). In the same regard, Vergani et al. argue that “study findings indicate that, in the eyes of many civically committed Muslims, Islam urges them to get involved in “active forms of community engagement and service” (qtd. in Peucker, 2018, p 11). Accordingly, it is thus an Islamic duty for Muslim immigrants to work for the common good of the entire society irrespective of its ethnic and religious minorities – the hybrid environment – in the Western societies they are.

It is most likely that the West invests money and efforts to study Islam and anthropologically know about Muslims. Yet, it seems that the West studies merely what aligns with the interests of its already established agendas upon Muslims. Lyons (2014) deepens this claim by contending that the West directs its scrutiny merely towards Muslims and never does a self-critique. The Western anti-Islam discourse is blindly defended and enforced rather than critiqued. He clarifies this more when he says that

Rarely have the central themes of the anti-Islam discourse faced serious critical scrutiny or nuanced analysis. Rather, they are often asserted or simply left unstated and unacknowledged, so that they operate silently in the background as they shape our statements about Islam and the Muslims and define the disciplines that organise and classify such knowledge. (p 16)

The institutions in the West do not spare enough efforts to obviate the blurred image and remove the stereotypes which surround Islam and Muslims. In the same context, Lyons (2014) argues that “[t]he West’s ‘conversation’ with Islam has always been a one-sided affair, essentially a dialogue with itself, revealing much about the subject but little or nothing about the object in question” (p 16). Such silently and historically inculcated misconceptions in both the Western institutions and the people’s minds feed the agendas of the far-right parties and organisations. Thus, they establish their anti-Islam discourse and pass new laws consistently to restrict the liberties granted to the Muslim immigrants or at least suppress them for fear that they would constitute a threat to the mainstream Western culture.

Just because a Muslim immigrant commits a misdeed does not lay his whole faith under charge. The West, in any ‘terrorist’ acts committed by some who claim their adherence to Islam, does not hesitate to put the blame on Islam as a whole. At least, the West must objectively look into the matter more closely to fathom out the reasons why such abominable acts were committed, the environment surrounding those who committed them; the push factors and so forth. However, the unquestioned fear towards Islam– added to the Orientalist understanding – prevents it from viewing the issue of immigration from the Muslim Immigrants’ angle. Samuel Huntington (1996) sums up that fear which the West is obsessed with in the following statement:

The future, however, is not irrevocably determined, nor is any one future permanent. The issue is not whether Europe will be Islamicised or the United States Hispanicised. It is whether Europe or America will become cleft societies encompassing two distinct and largely separate communities from two different civilisations, which in turn depends on the numbers of immigrants and the extent

to which they are assimilated into the Western cultures prevailing in Europe and America. (p 204)

For Huntington, then, the United States is concerned rather with the immigrants coming from Mexico more than it is bothered by the Muslim and Arab ones (1996). Seemingly from this statement, Huntington contradicts himself. On the one hand, he predicts that the immigrants will divide the Western countries into two disharmonious entities/civilisations. Of course, this means he predicts that such incongruence between these two distinct civilisations would certainly lead to inevitable dilemmas to the host lands – the West. On the other hand, he also points out to the possibility of the undesired immigrants to assimilate to the Western culture. That is, there is, indirectly, a possibility or, rather, an inevitable future reality, that the immigrants will interfere and influence the Western culture.

In fact, the West does all the previous steps, yet with a pre-established idea that it has always been Islam and Muslims which have constituted a threat. Therefore, violence is mostly addressed to Muslims rather than the other minorities: “[n]on- Arab African immigrants,” Hassan Al-Turabi argues, “are neither feared nor despised. The hostility is directed mostly at Muslims” (qtd. in Huntington, 1996, p 200). In this regard, Lyons (2014) metaphorically criticises such simplistic thinking yet strategic behaviour of the West towards Islam and Muslims: “[j]ust because a statement may consist of a truth about plants, for example, that does not necessarily qualify it as part of the recognised discipline known as botany” (p 35). Thus, before the West considers anything to be true about Islam and their faith, it must rid itself of its wishful thinking and bias.

In the same context, Lyons (2014) emphatically contends that even the church (during the era of Pope Benedict XVI) not merely was ‘misled’ by the erroneous interpretations about Islam and Muslims, but also it did not allow any room for statements or conclusions about Islam other than those imputing Muslims and Islam to violence. However, as Lyons (2014) concludes,

Nor is it only popes, politicians, and the public at large who are seduced by the siren call of the prevailing discourse; expertise and scholarship provide no surefire defense, as we can see in one example involving the historian Bernard Lewis. Lewis has long advocated a reading of Islam as an authoritarian and rigid faith—and thus implacably antimodern. (p 54)

One of the obstacles why the West holds such a belief that Islam – and of course Muslim immigrants – is backward, violent, authoritarian and so forth, is that it largely depended on the Orientalists’ discourse who brought ‘deformed’ image about the backward realities of Muslims to the West. The latter, as a result, puts Islam as faith and Muslims, who are liable to sin and wrongdoing given their humanness, together under blame. If consequently Muslims are backward given certain circumstances, it follows, that their faith is backward, too.

Due to the pressing cultural and political hegemony launched on the Muslim immigrants in the West, they are forced to religiously divide against themselves into multiple identities seeking to respond to the dictates of Western secularism. Among these identities are “communal Islam, ethical Islam, cultural Islam, and emotional Islam” (qtd. in Cesari, 2004, p 45). Cesari herself adds three more sub-divisions of such rhizomatic identities: “those who practice a private version of their faith, non-practicing Muslims who nonetheless identify on an ethical or emotional basis, and fundamentalists who embrace a totalising version of communal Islam” (p 46). While the communal Islam is related to the collective, orthodox and ‘literal’ practice of rituals, ethical Islam focuses on personal values, cultural Islam emphasises culture-related matters and emotional Islam is mainly based on mere reaction (p 46). On one hand, these divisions account for the success of the secular West – through its hegemony – to ‘water down’ the Muslim identity. The typology of the latter is summed up in Timothy Hellwig and Abdulkader Sinno’s (2017) article “Different groups, Different Threats: Public Attitudes towards Immigrants,” where they mention that “prominently featured are threats due to economic competition, cultural identity, security concerns, and crime.” On the other hand, such differentiated levels of adherence to faith from the part of the Muslim immigrants



reflect the absence – or rather the weakness – of a Muslim religious authority which would obviate how Islam would better be practiced smoothly within a secular environment and without compromising the essential religious teachings of Islam.

Therefore, the crux of the matter in this regard is whether the Muslim immigrants relinquish their religious identity to show the Western Other their readiness to integrate into the Western social structure, or, supposedly, this transformation is a sign of weakness from the part of the Muslim immigrants in that they could not establish a way through which they could preserve their religious identity and, nonetheless, succeed to harmoniously respond to the secular lure of the Western societies. In this vein, Cesari (2004) postulates that because of the cultural pressure the Western secular culture executes upon the Muslim immigrants, a new form of a more secular Islam emerges: Muslims “who identify on an ethical and emotional basis” (p 46) and who tend to privatise Islam or not practice it at all.

Jacques Derrida, a leading French philosopher, on the other hand, believes that harmony between secularisation and religion can come to existence. He argues that the essence of secularisation is not against religion *per se*: “I do not believe that the secularisation of the political presupposes a denial of religion” (Cherif, 2009, p 72). Thus, according to his understanding, secularisation is inevitable with regard to the attainment of democracy. Yet, he proposes that such secularisation must not proceed at the expense of religion. He then suggests that religion can achieve its freedom only within a secularised democracy. He adds that

Authentic believers, if that word has a meaning, are the first, or should be the first, to demand the separation of the political and the religious, because this is also the condition for the freedom of religion, so that religious communities can live according to their wishes and their desires. (Cherif, 2009, pp 72-73)

Worth considering here is Derrida’s attempt to negotiate the overwhelming relationship of religion and the State; the relationship whose negative impact the Western countries have tried to alleviate for many years, as they have thought, through excluding religion from the political, social and cultural scenes, particularly Islam.

Cesari (2004) notes that the challenge for the Muslim immigrants in the West, in short, is “to combine a self-examining and introspective approach to Islamic tradition with an active participation in society” (p 53); hence their schizophrenic identity. This daunting equation poses a real dilemma to Muslim immigrants. Therefore, who is scholarly legitimate to perform the task of combining the Muslim identity with the overwhelming Western reality? The answer to this question, once again, is governed by other circumstances akin to the different religious sects, disciplines of thought inherent in Islam; and also, whether the Muslim religious authorities in the West are scientifically capable of handling such an ordeal. Indeed, the Muslim immigrants’ attempt to ‘understand, their religion and respond to the cultural needs of the new society they are in – what Cesari (2004) names ‘modern orthodoxy,’ is a never-ending issue as long as immigration continues.

The cultural, ideological and political obsession of the West results from the fear of the ‘Islamisation’ of its societies (Boer, 2005). The process of the ongoing conversion to Islam in the European countries constitutes a real issue to the European governments in addition to the steady concern that Muslims one day will outweigh the other cultural divisions in number. These Western concerns have led the West to seek efficient ways to ‘immunise’ itself against the ‘perilous’ Muslim Other. The West considers it so for the reason that it is likely to rive the Western communities from within. “In Europe, the Other is primarily the Muslim. The latter is most often an immigrant, whose social position is defined almost entirely by his/her limited access to resources. The Muslim is viewed as “part of the risks involved in the modern European way of life and security” (qtd. in Bosakov, 2019). The immigrants’ constant attempts to integrate within these Western communities are perceived differently in various parts of the West. Scholars have confirmed that Muslim immigrants for instance encounter miscellaneous problems in France with respect to their integration and their practice of their faith, in comparison to other countries such as the Netherlands and Britain (e.g. Gilliat, 1994).

The concept of integration is paramount to this study. It is so in the context that it takes place in the ‘in-between’ space of the immigrants and the people of the receiving countries.

Therefore, it is crucial to discuss what it means and how it is manifested in the immigrants' lives in the West. "What is integration before all? Integration or 'biculturalism,'" (qtd. in Ward, 2013, p 392) is defined by Colleen Ward (2013) as "maintaining cultural heritage and participating in the wider society" (p 392). This definition seems simple, but it clearly encompasses a cryptic equation of how to strike a balance between "maintaining cultural heritage" and "participating in the wider society." Multiple researches have been conducted on this issue, qualitative and quantitative (e.g. Cesari, 2008; Byng, 2010; Sirin and Balsano, 2007; Saunders, 2012; Voas and Fleischmann, 2012, etc). Yet, none of these studies can claim its comprehensiveness related to the situation of the immigrants in the new settings they come to. The reason behind this hypothesis is that after the immigrants move to the West, their situation gets mixed up, overlapping and intricate given many reasons akin to the countries which receive them. One of the optimistic research studies, which deal with this immigrants' relocation to the West rather positively, is a study conducted by Colleen Ward (2013). Discussing the issue of the immigrants who choose to integrate into the majority culture, Ward believes that "[t]here is certainly strong evidence that integration is beneficial to psychological well-being, social competence and intercultural relations" (p 392). Thus, immigrants who manage to overcome the 'cultural shock' they have to go through as soon as they mingle with the new culture, tend to experience a smooth transition from living just within the Self to living with the Other. J. W. Berry posits, in the same context, that "those who pursue and accomplish integration appear to be better adapted, and those who are marginalised are the least well adapted" (qtd in Ward, 2013, p 392). Thus, there are at least two categories of immigrants: those who manage to integrate and those who are marginalised, hence their malfunctioning process of integration. Such situation clarifies that the situation of immigrants' integration into the majority culture is inevitable depending on certain conditions not in the hands of the immigrants themselves – at least the most determining ones.

Ward (2013) attempts to negotiate the side of the integration process pertinent to the immigrants. He thus proposes the concept of 'balance,' aiming at justifying one process, among others, the immigrants go through during the diaspora experience. Ward defines 'balance' that it refers to "negotiating identity, religion and societal demands in a way that permits the retention of traditional values" (p 393). Indeed, here resides the challenge facing the immigrants' stability in the Western societies: how they can negotiate their culture and in what way that negotiation can take place without them sacrificing the 'purity' of their own culture; and also, to what extent they can – if at all – 'prune' their cultural purity to smoothly fit within the 'demands' of the new culture without 'deforming' the essence of their own. Ward himself admits that attaining that balance he highly cherishes can be a mere illusion given the rhizomatic situation of the immigrants, which has been discussed above. He consequently contends that "[v]iewing "balance" as an indication of success is one thing, but achieving it is another" (Ward, 2013, p 393). However, Ward essays to solve this dilemma by suggesting two more crucial concepts in this regard: alternating and blending.

On the one hand, Ward argues that "[b]alanced individuals often alternated between ethnic, cultural, religious or national orientations as they viewed the need for different types of roles or behaviours across settings" (p 393). That is, the immigrant has to adopt a flexible method in responding to the Western cultural demands, yet without sacrificing the core 'spirit' of his identity. What follows is that logically "different aspects of self are highlighted dependent upon the context" (Ward, 2013, p 393). The immigrant's self then behaves according to the cultural supply and demand of the receiving culture. On the other hand, Ward offers another path the immigrants could walk, that of 'blending.' According to him, "[blending] refers to a hybridization of multiple roles, behaviours and identities by picking and choosing which elements of traditional and "mainstream" cultures to adopt" (Ward, 2013, p 394). In other words, the immigrants do not possess another solution outside merely 'finding a way out,' as long as they are under-stressed by the hegemony of the mainstream culture, hence their compulsion of choice. After all, Muslim immigrants are invited to positively negotiate their religious culture with the new culture they have to live in.

Karen Phalet and Anika Kotic (2005) posit that the West itself is divided upon itself as regards the issue of immigrants in the sense that some Western states support the idea of integrating immigrants into the mainstream culture, while others ask for expelling them from

the Western countries. In this context, Phalet and Kotic contend that “proponents of integration – in the European sense of the term – usually require the subordination, though not necessarily the abandonment, of ethnic loyalties to the dominant national culture and identity in order to achieve full citizenship in the receiving society” (p 9). Subordinating the immigrants’ minority, however, does not contribute to the general cultural harmony which the Western countries hanker after.

At issue is Ward’s model of integration especially when the conditions of such integration come to the fore. These conditions are demarcated by multiple realities akin to, first, ethnicity, origin, religion of the immigrants; and second, to the socio-political and economic conditions of the country which receives them; and third to the pre-established ideology which the receiving country holds of the immigrants.

### **Integration through faith in *Minaret***

Worth mentioning About Leila Aboulela, a Sudanese Writer who significantly writes in English, is that she admits that her characters are rather ordinary Muslim immigrants who are liable to flaws in their way to understand and react to the distinct culture of the West. In 2005 she declares in an interview: “[m]y characters do not behave necessarily as a ‘good Muslim’ should. They are not ideals or role models. They are, as I see them to be, ordinary Muslims trying to practice their faith in difficult circumstances” (qtd. in Hassan, 2008, p 310). When Muslim immigrants move to and reside in the Western countries, thus, they become subject to the pressure of a majority culture which deems their integration difficult. Such “difficult circumstances” can be seen in Aboulela’s *Minaret* (2005).

The feeling of amazement and fascination soon turns into depression and dejection when immigrants start to compare the conditions in the countries they come from to these in the receiving ones. Political instability, weak infrastructure and general backwardness deem Najwa, the protagonist of the novel, ashamed of her origin. She expresses it well when she says:

For the first time in my life, I disliked London and envied the English, so unperturbed and grounded, never displaced, never confused. For the first time, I was conscious of my shitty-coloured skin next to their placid paleness. What was wrong with me today? I had a warm bath when I got home. I heated up a tin of soup. My dislike of London went away and left me feeling ill. (p 122)

Such comparison represents the curse of being an immigrant in a new country. It gives them a sense of frustration and inferiority given that they have come to a country where everything ‘is in shape,’ compared to their country of origin. At first when Najwa comes to London, it is hard for her to resist the temptation which comes in different forms in the West. She and her brother, Omar, want to feel Western and forget about their exile at least for some time. Yet, their Sudanese culture hovers over them and makes them feel guilt. Najwa says to Omar: “[w]e can’t go to a disco because of Baba,’ ... ‘What do you want people to say? The man’s on trial for his life and his children are dancing in London” (p 46). Najwa rather shows due respect to tradition than to her faith. If someone saw them in the disco at a time their father was on trial due to the political coup in Sudan, they would not be immune from people’s gossip. Not only does Najwa privatise religion, but also she relegates it to a mere tradition which needs not to be violated. What follows is that Omar underestimates the presence of his cultural mores in a Western environment when he replied to Najwa: “[w]hat people? Who do you think is going to know us in there? Don’t be silly” (p 46). This way, Najwa and Omar believe that tradition and religion do restrict them not to set free their desires of having fun in the West. However, the importance Muslim immigrants give to preserving their Muslim identity produce xenophobic feelings in the Western national, given they conceive of that as a threat to the unity and domination of their culture.

Muslim women’s visibility represented in their veil often constitutes a problem for them as regards the way such visibility is perceived by the Western Other. The Muslim woman aims

through this visibility to struggle to preserve her religious and cultural identity within a space surrounded by non-Muslims (Al-Karawi and Bahar, 2012). However, such visibility might often be offending to some racist non-Muslims. Najwa says:

I hear footsteps come up behind me, see a blur of denim. He says, '*you Muslim scum*', then the shock of cool liquid on my head and face. I gasp and taste it, Tizer. He goes back to his friends - they are laughing [...] It could have been *beer* but I've been lucky. (Aboulela, 2005 p 61, italics my emphasis)

Depriving Muslim women from an ordinary life in the West due to their veil is, therefore, a sign of "the anvil and hammer experience plenty of diasporians have to endure" (Basu, 2021, p 7). Muslim Women, thus, mainly devoted ones, are under the pressure of being different from the Other.

To resist such pressure, Muslim immigrants tend to form co-ethnic communities in order for them, on the one hand, to strengthen their identity – which is based on the concept of the *ummah* – within the secular and non-religious environment they live in; and on the other hand, to constitute a cultural bulwark against the hegemony of the Western culture which persistently seeks to 'tame' and 'reform' the minority cultures under the premise that they represent a strategic threat to the majority culture. As such, Muslim immigrants, thus, make of the mosque not merely a place of worship, but more importantly a haven where they can express their religious belongingness and a sense of community, togetherness and solidarity. Speaking about her community in the mosque, Najwa narrates:

They are the kindest people I have ever met in the mosque, kind enough not to ask me questions or expect confessions in return for their favours. Why Shahinaz chose me as a friend, and how Sohayl approved her choice, is one of those strokes of good fortune I don't question. We have little in common. If I tell her that, I think she will say, very matter-of-fact, 'But we both want to become better Muslims. (p 76)

The crux of the matter is, however, whether or not all Muslim immigrants can retain their religiosity after they relocate to a Western country. Also, finding and yet belonging to a Muslim community is not an available choice to all Muslim immigrants.

In *Minaret* (2005), Aboulela puts it forward that Islam does not give importance to race, geography, ethnicity or history more than the Muslim identity. She obviates that a Muslim can be in a geography whose mainstream faith is Islam, but still privatises Islam or does not practice it altogether. On the contrary, a Muslim immigrant might be more loyal to their faith than another Muslim in their origin country. In the same context, Omar, Najwa's brother, when questioned by her whether he feels himself a Sudanese, given the 'Muslimness' of the latter, he replies:

My mother is Egyptian. I've lived everywhere except Sudan: in Oman, Cairo, here. My education is Western and that makes me feel that I am Western. My English is stronger than my Arabic. So I guess, no, I don't feel very Sudanese though I would like to be. I guess being a Muslim is my identity. What about you? 'I talk slowly. I feel that I am Sudanese but things changed for me when I left Khartoum. Then even while living here in London, I've changed. And now, like you, I just think of myself as a Muslim. (p 80)

There exist Muslim immigrants who would struggle to maintain that religious purity within such an overwhelming hybrid space dominated by the Western culture. Nonetheless, there are other Muslim immigrants who would rather jettison their cultural identity and 'melt' in the lure of the Western civilisation at the expense of who they are and what they should continue to be. Aboulela discusses this meticulous issue pointing out that it is Muslim immigrants' low self-esteem which contributes to their self-hate and approval of the Other:

I said to Anwar, 'It's interesting about converts isn't it? What would make a Westerner become a Muslim?' He made a face.

'I think they're brave.'

You say that because as Muslims our self-esteem is so low that we're desperate for approval. And what greater stamp of approval can there be than a white man's?' (p 113)

Anwar represents such a schizophrenic identity a Muslim immigrant can hold when they get hypnotised with the temptation of the Western civilisation witnessed in the street, transportation, administration and everywhere else:

'The West is very impressive.' He sounded reluctant or as if he was thinking out loud, working something out. 'Everything is organized. Everyone has a part to play. There's a system in place. A very structured system. I like the underground. If you want to go anywhere, you just ask what is the nearest underground station and then you can get there.' (p 105)

Such fluctuations of identity adherence among Muslim immigrants account for the rhizomatic nature of their diasporic reality. Seemingly thus, the challenge Muslim immigrants have resides pivotally in, on the one hand, striking a smooth balance between keeping their religious and cultural identity immune from the infiltration of the mainstream secular culture of the West; and participating positively in what serves the entire Western community they newly belong to, "to reconcile their faith with the opportunities that democracy, modernity and largely secular, i.e. worldly, lifestyles offer" (Somer, 2007, p 1277), on the other. Randa, Najwa's friend from school years in Khartoum, is another Sudanese Muslim girl who gets absorbed by the Western civilisation to the extent that she regards other Muslim religious immigrants with contempt and derision. In a conversation with Najwa, she openly expresses her repulsion to their modest Muslim dressing style – the veil:

We talked about her social life. Yes, there were some Sudanese in Edinburgh University - quite a number of families - bored wives, she said, with screaming children. They invited her for dinner; she always declined. 'Why?' I asked.

'So many of them are Islamists. You know the type, the wife in hijab having one baby after the other.'

'Aren't there women students too?'

'Yes, unfortunately. The sight of them wearing hijab on campus irritates me.' (p 96)

Having a schizophrenic Muslim identity, hence, means succumbing one's identity to the demands of the domineering culture, wherein the Muslim identity may rather be hijacked or abducted; hence the Muslim immigrant's schizophrenic identity. Schizophrenia affects the essence of the self as Fabrega (1989) argues: "schizophrenia unravels the psychological ingredients that serve as cornerstones of an individual's interpretation of and ability to function in his/her behavioural environment" (p 286). Cultural schizophrenia, thus, leads to a deformed and ambivalent identity, an identity of immigrants that is not theirs – a usurped identity.

### **Cultural schizophrenia in *The Other Americans***

Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans* (2019) casts light on Muslim immigrants' disillusionment as a result of their attempt to 'emulate' and assimilate to the Westerner's secular culture. Nora Guerraoui, the protagonist, after the mysterious death of her father in a horrific hit-and-run accident next to his restaurant at night, drowned in despair due to the

loss of her father, finds solace in revolting against the cultural norms of her family and assimilates to the American culture instead. On the contrary, Maryam, her mother, is observant and conservative. Nora tells us about her: “[i]t was a strength she derived from her deep faith, and in that moment I envied her for it. All I had were uncertainties” (p 224). Her dream is to preserve her family together as well as immunise it against the cultural infiltration of the American culture.

There is a difference between the first generation of immigrants and the second in terms of their attachment to their faith and also their assimilation to the Western culture. Maryam seems very religious in that she relates all the life obstacles and problems she encounters to her faith. She strongly believes that all these hardships come from God and hence must be borne. Nora speaks about her mother:

My mother knew better, she didn't try to fight her feelings of pain or fear, but accepted them as she might accept unwelcome visitors, knowing that someday, even if it was very far from the future, they would leave. It was a strength she derived from her deep faith, and in that moment I envied her for it. All I had were uncertainties. (p 224)

Whereas her daughter, Nora, is completely shunning her religion in that she is westernised in almost everything including her mentality, behaviour and the way she dresses. Drinking alcohol and tattooing one's body are obvious signs of being assimilated to the American culture:

I finished my drink and motioned to the waitress that I wanted another one.

“what's it say?” he [Jeremy, her lover] asked, looking at the tattoo on my wrist.

“It's Latin. ‘ A voice crying out.’”

He reached across the table and touched the inside of my wrist, then turned my hand toward the light to get a better look. “Any reason?” (p 92)

In fact, given that no one would better understand children than their mother, Maryam knows well that Nora has been different from Salma since her childhood. Even her childhood was abnormal. Maryam describes Nora's strong-headedness and schizophrenic identity epitomised in her loss when she says: “she looked lost, and in a way, she *was* lost. She always has her head in the clouds” (p 81). Nora is torn between two trajectories: holding to the Muslim culture represented by her family and the Western culture which urges her to hanker after the American dream; hence her schizophrenia.

The first generation of Muslim immigrants assume the task of preserving and transmitting their cultural identity to their children. Maryam, therefore, does her best to attain the unity of her Muslim family: “all I ever wanted was to keep my family together” (p 79). Maryam persistently tries to transfer Muslim cultural identity norms to her oldest daughter.

Boer (2005) argues that Muslim immigrants can participate in improving democracy in the West: “Islam is a social religion. Practising Islam means participating in the social endeavour, also in the West. The Muslim should participate in Western democracy and not refrain from it” (p 1198). While Salma tries to serve her Western community by being a good dentist and by marrying a Muslim doctor who would help her do her job well, Nora loses her way, especially after the death of her dad who used to support her life choices, in search for adopting an identity which is rather not meant to be hers. In fact, Nora's ‘uncertainties’ (Lalami, 2019, p 224) represents her identity loss which is likely to happen to any immigrant. It is a form of cultural schizophrenia, reminiscent of the character of Randa in Aboulela's *Minaret*. While the latter starts vilifying Muslims who are struggling to maintain their religious identity in an overwhelmingly secular British culture, Nora, Maryam's “poor, gullible daughter” (p 269), in Lalami's *The Other Americans*, chooses to stay away, spatially and culturally, from her mother merely because she fancies dating Anwar, smoking and drinking alcohol, without her observant mother witnessing that.

Thus, Nora represents a hybrid culture, an offspring of two disparate cultures: a Muslim culture and a Western culture. However, she rather represents an incommensurate hybridity in that she rather assimilates to the Western culture more than to her Muslim one. Lalami conveys that for a Muslim immigrant, what they would consider to be a 'desert,' dark and backward, might be their sole place where they can take refuge to preserve their identity and empower it within a culture which seeks to make salient the cultural borders against minorities whenever the latter 'threaten' its hegemony.

## Conclusion

This paper has navigated the cultural in-betweenness in the cultural zone of contact between the Muslim immigrants and the Western nationals. It has elucidated how these immigrants' identity can be rhizomatic in terms of the cultural trajectories their identities would go through. To shed light on the intricacies which keeping one's identity as an immigrant pure embody, this paper has traced the identity of Muslim immigrants through the characters of Najwa, Omar, Anwar and Randa in Aboulela's *Minaret*; and Maryam and Nora in Lalami's *The Other Americans*. This study has also shown that if a successful integration of the Muslim immigrants is to be attained, both the Western countries and the Muslim immigrants are in charge of taking measures to ease the smoothness between the two disparate cultures. On one part, the West needs to objectively study Islam *qua* faith and accordingly treat Muslim immigrants; treat them as believers who have the right to practice their faith. On the other, Muslim immigrants should seek to reconcile their religiosity to the Western context based on the guidance of a religious authority which has the expertise in the Western specificities. The Muslim immigrants' reality, however, will still continue to be a daunting area of research given its rhizomatic nature and a world whose globalisation deems everything on the verge of downfall.

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