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Transliteration Table: Consonants

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
ب	b		ط	ṭ
ت	t		ظ	ẓ
ث	th		ع	‘
ج	j		غ	gh
ح	ḥ		ف	f
خ	kh		ق	q
د	d		ك	k
ذ	dh		ل	l
ر	r		م	m
ز	z		ن	n
س	s		ه	h
ش	sh		و	w
ص	ṣ		ء	’
ض	ḍ		ي	y

Transliteration Table: Vowels and Diphthongs

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
◌َ	a		◌ًا، ◌ًى	an
◌ُ	u		◌ٌو	un
◌ِ	i		◌ٍي	in
◌َا، ◌ٰ، ◌َى،	ā		◌َوْ	aw
◌ُو	ū		◌َيْ	ay
◌ِي	ī		◌ُوَ	uww, ū (in final position)
			◌ِيَ	iyy, ī (in final position)

Source: ROTAS Transliteration Kit: http://rotas.iium.edu.my

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The Spiritual Quest in Contemporary Muslim Speculative Writing: A Reading of *Bird Summons* (2023) by Leila Aboulela

Wan Nur Madiha binti Ramlan*
Raihan binti Rosman**

Abstract

This paper presents an examination of Leila Aboulela's *Bird Summons* (2019) as a site where speculative writing and Islamic spirituality intersect. By employing Islamicisation of Knowledge as a framework, this paper analyses how Aboulela utilises motifs of pilgrimage, metamorphosis and the unseen to foreground the spiritual struggles of diasporic Muslim women living in the United Kingdom. The novel's magical realist elements are reoriented within an Islamic paradigm that emphasises *jihād al-nafs* (struggle of the self), *ṣabr* (patience), *tawakkul* (trust in God, and *tazkiyyah al-nafs* (purification of the soul). Through the journey of the three principal characters, *Bird Summons* dramatises the confrontation with inner deficiencies and the pursuit of spiritual rejuvenation by situating these processes within broader conversations about identity, migration, and modernity. In doing so, this study contends that Aboulela's work provides a counter-narrative to Western literary frameworks that often marginalise or misrepresent Islam, thereby contributing to an emerging corpus of Speculative writing, particularly by women writers, that both challenge and redefine boundaries of the genre.

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Keywords: Islamicisation of Knowledge, Muslim writing, Speculative Fiction, Islamic Literature, Spirituality

Abstrak

Artikel ini menganalisis *Bird Summons* (2019) karya Leila Aboulela sebagai ruang pertemuan antara penulisan spekulatif dan kerohanian Islam. Berasaskan kerangka Islamisasi Ilmu, analisis ini meneliti penggunaan motif ziarah, metamorfosis, dan alam ghaib dalam mengenengahkan perjuangan kerohanian wanita diaspora Islam di United Kingdom. Unsur realisme magis dalam novel ini ditafsir semula menggunakan paradigma Islam yang memberi penekanan terhadap *jihād al-nafs* (perjuangan melawan nafsu dalam diri), *ṣabr* (kesabaran), dan *tazkiyyah al-nafs* (penyucian jiwa). Melalui perjalanan tiga watak utama, *Bird Summons* memperlihatkan pertembungan kelemahan dalaman serta usaha mencapai pembaharuan rohani dalam konteks wacana identiti, migrasi, dan kemodenan. Artikel ini mengemukakan hujah bahawa karya Leila Aboulela menawarkan naratif balas terhadap kerangka sastera Barat yang sering meminggirkan atau menyalahgambarkan Islam. Ini sekaligus menyumbang kepada perkembangan penulisan spekulatif khususnya oleh penulis wanita Islam yang mencabar dan mentakrik semula batasan genre tersebut.

Kata Kunci: Islamisasi Ilmu, penulisan Islam, fiksyen spekulatif, sastera Islam, kerohanian

Introduction

A principal concern in Islamic thought is the spiritual journey of the self as it is a fundamental and essential component of a Muslim's life. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1987) explains that in Islam, the Spirit permeates everything, revealing to us the Unity of Allah (p. xv). Seyyed Hossein further argues that this awareness of the Principle of Unity (*al-Tawḥīd*) is inseparable from the core of Islamic spirituality. Al-Ghazali, who is one of the most prominent Muslim theologians and philosophers, asserts that spirituality is an important means to achieve happiness in life. The heart, al-Ghazali argues, is much like a mirror that needs to be polished to reflect God's Light, which is the ultimate source of happiness for a Muslim. Seyyed Hossein and al-Ghazali both underscore the importance of spirituality as a transformative process by which a Muslim actualises their faith and lives a life aligned to *al-Tawḥīd*. Whilst the Qur'ān is *the* source of guidance for Islamic spirituality, over the course of

history, Muslims have and continue to explore the human experience of attaining this state of being. Their effort in discovering the complexities and human experience concerning the spiritual journey is articulated in many types of cultural artefacts and other means of human expression, including literature. The twenty-first century presents a wide range of challenges to the spiritual life of Muslims, which largely stem from the rapid pace of globalisation, newer technology, and shifts in global culture. With these also come the rise of consumerist and materialist behaviour, where there is a relentless pursuit of material possession and consumer culture, which erodes the focus on God. Literature, being one of the principal means of human expression, has become a space for problematising the challenges and dichotomies of this modernity, whilst at the same time offering new narratives that discuss Islamic concepts.

Speculative writing, which includes subgenres such as fantasy, sci-fi, and magical realism, is a unique medium for portraying this journey of spiritual growth and attainment in Islam and the challenges that come with it. Indeed, in the past decade, there has been a notable rise in Muslim writers, particularly women, who explore themes of faith and identity through speculative writing. Whilst often dismissed as mere escapism or frivolous, this article contends that the novel *Bird Summons* (2019) by Leila Aboulela serves as examples of Islamicisation of Knowledge in contemporary literature. Through the use of speculative fiction, Aboulela foregrounds the spiritual journey and the process of self-purification. In doing so, she presents important counter-narratives that subvert reductive and monolithic portrayals of Muslims in popular media. At the same time, Aboulela helps synthesise an Islamic spiritual worldview with contemporary literary forms.

These acts of countering and reclaiming have their roots in a broader intellectual movement in the Muslim World. For a large amount of time, the dominant narratives in human knowledge, including literature, have been shaped by Western perspectives. In the last few decades, however, there has been a concerted effort by a group of Muslim scholars to re-orientate and re-centre disciplines of human knowledge through the lens of the Islamic worldview. This includes knowledge produced by Muslims as well. Much like the decolonisation movement, this process, termed by Mohd. Kamal Hassan as 'Islamicisation of Human Knowledge,' seeks to interrogate human knowledge systems, including those produced by Muslims, and integrate Islamic principles into these systems.

A Brief History of the Speculative and Muslim Writing

Speculative fiction, whether it is sci-fi, fantasy, or dystopia, is often situated between human imagination and reflection. By crafting narratives about possible futures and conscious deviations from reality, speculative writers create the often fantastical to highlight circumstances of the present. What this means is that speculative writing is not necessarily predicting the future, showing readers and audiences speculative futures and realities that are often strange and otherworldly; speculative works are rooted in current issues and problems. Having said all this, speculative writing is difficult to define. Robert A. Heinlein, who is an American science fiction author is often credited with the term. In his essay "On the Writing of Speculative Fiction" (1947), Heinlein discussed 'speculative science fiction story' as a means to create "new framework for human action" (pp. 16 -17). Heinlein is specifically referring to science fiction, but since his time, the boundaries of speculative fiction have changed significantly. Margaret Atwood describes speculative fiction as a subgenre in which the possibilities within our world are narrated within the framework of "what if?" whilst Ursula K. Le Guin refers to it as an umbrella term that encompasses many other genres, such as fantasy, science fiction, and even space opera. Marek Oziewicz (2017) argues that the focus perhaps should not be on trying to define speculative fiction. Rather, Oziewicz proposes that speculative fiction should be theorised instead as a term whose semantic register has continued to grow.

Speculative fiction's growing popularity is a testament to its enduring quality and its commentary on the various anxieties across time. Yet, its fantastical character has often been at the root of dismissive criticism, with many simply describing it as a means of escapism. The importance of speculative writing within human material culture and reflection is aptly described by whom many consider one of the best speculative writers of all-time, Le Guin. In her work *No Time to Spare: Thinking about What Matters* (2017), Le Guin challenges the negative connotation associated with escapism: "What does *escape* mean? Escape from real life, responsibility, order, duty, piety, is what the charge implies. But nobody, except the most criminally irresponsible or pitifully incompetent, escapes jail. The direction of escape is toward freedom. So, what is "escapism" an accusation of? (Le Guin 65).

Despite these accusations, speculative writing is a genre that has a long tradition of providing readers with various social, cultural, and political commentary. Books such as *1984* (1953) by George Orwell, *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) by Ray Bradbury and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) by Margaret Atwood, for example, provide caution concerning the dangers of Totalitarianism and the loss of individualism, while *The Lord of the Rings* (1951-1954) by J.R.R. Tolkien, *Dune* (1965) by Frank Herbert and *The Foundation Series* (1951-1953) by Isaac Asimov present questions concerning knowledge, civilisation, and the corrupting influence of power. All these texts present us with various "what if?" scenarios as a means of reflection and the drive towards action.

Despite its significance and popularity, it has only begun to be appreciated as an area in need of scholarly attention within the last three decades. Many scholars studying speculative writing focus on a wide range of topics, such as black and intersectional speculative writing and writing from the Global South. Even though there is some scholarship on Islam and speculative fiction, it is rather limited. Seeing that this is the case, this project aims to be a substantial contribution to knowledge by finding relations between speculative fiction and Islam, and how Islam and Muslim cultures are capable of exploring issues and challenges faced by minority groups who are situated in various geographical settings. This potentially contributes to the development of Critical Muslim Literary Studies as mentioned in Peter Morey's *Islamophobia and the Novel* (2018), Geoffrey Nash's *Writing Muslim Identity* (2012) and Amin Malak's *Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English* (2005).

Globally, more writers are producing works that are speculative in character. None more so than Muslim writers. Currently, there is a growing, vibrant wave of Muslim writers producing works of speculative writing, especially among women authors such as Leila Aboulela and G. Willow Wilson. Noor Hashem (2021), who has written extensively on Muslim American writing, states that a number of these Muslim women writers focus on speculative writing, especially for young adults, and frame their work within feminism and Islamic theology (p. 168). Noor Hashem also explains that the works of these writers also include discussion about representation especially concerning Muslim women, often in a setting where the worldbuilding includes elements that reference Muslim history and culture.

Notwithstanding these developments in Speculative writing, Arab and Muslim presence in this genre is not new, particularly in fantasy. This perception that speculative writing is a Western invention is driven by the genre often being viewed through a Western lens. *One Thousand and One Nights* (or *Alf Laylah wa-Laylah* in the Arabic), which is the subject of much scrutiny concerning European innovation to the collection, is a collection of tales and fables that were collected over a large period of time across West Asia, Central Asia, South Asia, and North Africa, and compiled and translated into Arabic during the 8th century. In the 9th century, al-Farabi, a famed Islamic philosopher, wrote a treatise about a utopian city led by a philosopher-king in *The Virtuous City*.

A key dimension of this history is how speculative writing has been used by Muslim writers as a tool of resistance. Whilst earlier works tend to focus on philosophical aspects, Muslim speculative writing evolved and changed in response to Western colonialism. In the early 20th century, Muslim writers began exploring the speculative as a counter-narrative and resistance. In a world besieged by colonialism, Muslim writers began using speculative writing as a means to resist colonialism and other means of social and cultural oppression. In the early 20th century, as a response to misogyny and sexism in her society, Bengali writer Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain envisions a utopia where women hold the seat of power in *Sultana's Dream* (1905). In Nigeria, Muhamaddu Bello Kagara presented an alternative universe where Nigerian resistance against British colonialism is aided by fantastical and mythical creatures in *Gandoki* (1934). Despite this long folk and literary tradition, speculative writing, especially science fiction, had historically either neglected portrayals of Islam and Muslim characters or portrayed Muslim/Arab-inspired characters and cultures in a negative light, oscillating between being invisible and their depictions coloured by Orientalist stereotypes and tropes. This adds to the problematic framing of Islam and Muslims in the Western imaginary, often highlighting age-old Western anxieties concerning Islam and the often-touted Muslim-West irrevocable dichotomy. These depictions, which persist in literature and other forms of cultural production, point to what Sophia Rose Arjana (2015) calls the creation and sustenance of the 'Muslim Monster' in Western imagination.

Today, there seems to be a notable shift in how the genre is perceived and produced within a broader corpus of Muslim writing. A growing number of Muslim writers are using speculative writing as a means to explore, discover, interrogate, challenge, and reimagine understandings concerning Islamic culture, identity, and what it means to be Muslim in the twenty-first century. They also use speculative writing as a means to critique social, cultural, and political issues. At the same time, these writers add to the growing number of Muslim writings globally that provide an opportunity for readers to reassess their assumptions about Islam and Muslims. Writers such as Leila Aboulela, G. Willow Wilson, S.A. Chakraborty, Ahmed Sadaawi, Khadija Abdalla Bajaber, and Sabaa Tahir, many of them women, make up a new generation of Muslim writers reimagining our world and creating new ones through their writing. More importantly, they are redrawing the boundary of speculative writing, one that confronts and challenges assumptions about Islam, Muslims, and their cultures.

The last several decades have also recorded increased Global South scholarship concerning areas of the speculative. Key theorist on global imaginaries of the future Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay advocates for the reframing of science fiction and futurism outside the Euro-American framework that has since become the "default" lens in which speculative writing is perceived. In his work "Speculative Futures of Global South Infrastructures" (2022), Chattopadhyay argues that science fiction should be differentiated as a genre from what he calls 'Future Fiction.' Future Fiction differs from Science Fiction due to its approach of giving priority to socially, politically, and planetarily rooted futures. Unlike Future Fiction, Science Fiction often places emphasis on portrayals of purely technological and scientific imaginary futures. Furthermore, Chattopadhyay also frames the Global South not as a geopolitical space. Rather, he argues that it is a dual condition of disadvantage in terms of infrastructure and systemic marginalisation. Chattopadhyay's framework supports the various themes that appear in many Middle Eastern and/or Muslim speculative writing by validating Global South epistemologies and by situating these literary traditions within Global South discourses of imagination and resistance.

Syed Mustafa Ali's "Muslim, Not Supermuslim: A Critique of Islamicate Transhumanism" criticises Roy Jackson's *Muslim and*

Supermuslim: The Quest for the Perfect Being and Beyond (2020). Jackson's work proposes a progressive transformation of a Muslim into a Supermuslim through Islamicate philosophical and theological approaches. Ali, on the other hand, argues that Jackson's approach is a product of white supremacy by framing attention to the assimilation processes of Islamicate Transhumanism. Ali defines 'transhumanism' and 'transhumanists' in terms of their "demographic constitution and where they tend to be located within the modern and colonial world system" (p.1). This paper is important in the areas of Muslim Science Fiction and Speculative Fiction as it successfully connects transhumanism and the Islamicate realm through Sufism. It invites readers to explore transhumanism in works by Rumi, Muhammad Iqbal, Ibn Tufayl, and Ibn Rushd. The only limitation in Jackson's work, as well as Ali's main critique, is that there is no attempt to view science or transhumanism using an Islamic epistemological lens.

A more recent publication by Anis Afifi Norbasudi and Raihan Rosman in their work "Palestinian Speculative Fiction: Reimagining Home in Virtual Palestine" (2025) explores an urgent situation that has been happening in Palestine over seven decades, particularly in the Gaza Strip. Selected short stories in *Palestinian +100: Stories from a Century after the Nakba* (2019) utilise the speculative genre in demonstrating the complexities of nostalgia and trauma under colonial anxieties. This work illustrates how speculative fiction can be empowering and a transformative form of storytelling, especially during difficult times.

Nazry Bahrawi's work on Islamic Utopianism is also of note. In "Islamic Utopianism" (2017), Bahrawi argues that the contemporary dismissal of utopia as a concept that is naive masks its role in Medieval European and early Islamicate thought as a serious practice toward human development. Referencing Karl Mannheim's work, Bahrawi frames utopia not only as an idealised place, but also a form of psyche or mode of thinking which contests dominant and hegemonic realities. He states that Islamic Utopianism has three main strains, which are mystical, eschatological, and reformist. Importantly, Bahrawi's work positions Islamic Utopianism within the landscape of speculative imaginaries where it functions more as a driver of hope whether it is through mystical perfectibility, eschatological perceptions, or reformist visions.

Islamisication of Human Knowledge and Speculative Writing

In a seminar in 2021 on "Islam and English Studies" hosted by the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), the late Mohd. Kamal Hassan underscored the function of Islamicisation of Human Knowledge (IOHK, which evolved from Islamisation of Knowledge). First advocated by Syed Muhammad Naguib al-Attas in 1978, IOHK aims at reorienting and reassessing human knowledge within the Islamic framework because it has the potential to be erroneous and/ or contradictory to Islamic principles. Hence, IOK is a process that not only necessitates the conformity and harmonisation of human knowledge systems to Islamic thought but also validates knowledge systems that are compatible with Islam.

This project will be approached through the ways in which religion, here Islam, and popular culture are explored and interconnected with one another, and how all these points contribute to how the spiritual quest is situated within the texts. Thus, the approach that this project will adhere to is a faith-based perspective; one that encompasses Islam and its entirety. What this means is that, in order to present a reading of Islam in these speculative texts, we will scrutinise literature through the lens of Qur'an and Ḥadīth literatures, *sīrah*, Islamic jurisprudence, as well as Muslim cultures. By approaching literature through the lens of Islam, it signifies that Islamisation and integration of multidisciplinary areas of research are possible. This approach is in line with IIUM's mission to integrate instead of separating secular knowledge and Islamic revealed knowledge, following the concept of Islamisation of Knowledge expounded by Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, Ismail al-Faruqi, and Mohd. Kamal Hassan. It is important to highlight al-Attas' concern about colonial ideologies and practices because the use of these, particularly the ones that are contrary to Islamic belief and culture, diverts the knowledge seeker from the truth. Al-Faruqi calls upon Muslims to integrate

Islamic and secular education systems, which will necessitate the deconstruction of all knowledge disciplines, including the natural sciences and humanities, and reconstitute them with Islam as the bedrock. This process of Islamisation enables these disciplines to prioritise Islamic principles in their creation and interpretation of knowledge. This need for integration of these two knowledge systems

is echoed by Mohd. Kamal Hassan (2013), who called for an urgent need to give more attention to "Qur'anic paradigms of true human development and of integrated knowledge" (p. 20). This is necessary to the transformation of what al-Faruqi terms as "malaise of the ummah." With all of these considered, these three perspectives of Islamisation make up the trifecta for the theoretical underpinning of this project.

Nonetheless, faith and religion have had an arguably turbulent position in speculative writing subgenres such as science fiction. Farah Mendlesohn (2003) argues that religion is often depicted as an obstacle to true enlightenment and reason, dangerous and misleading (p. 269).

Studies on Faith in Speculative Writing: A Brief Overview

There is a preoccupation surrounding faith in speculative fiction, particularly science fiction novels and films. Academic discussion surrounding faith and religion in various speculative texts is equally prosperous, but a focus on how Islam in speculative fiction is lacking in two ways: firstly, in the dearth of what is available, and secondly, in the diversity of the discussions. Whilst there are some scholarly attentions given, they can be categorised only within two main trends; the first being how Islam and Muslims are represented in speculative writing by largely non-Muslim authors, and how Islam is drawn upon and used in their works. The second revolves around Muslim contributions to speculative writing where writers either present a sense of Muslimness or use their writing as a means to challenge dangerous myths and stereotypes concerning Islam and Muslim. One of the foci of scholarly work on Islam and speculative fiction pays attention to premising and interrogating the nature of speculative writing about Islam and Muslims. In her work, "Fictional Islam: A Literary Review and Comparative Essay on Islam in Science Fiction and Fantasy" (2010), Rebecca Hankins coins the term fictional Islam as "to define the various forms of speculative fiction by Muslim and non-Muslim writers who have used Islam and Muslims as characters, plots and colourful backgrounds" (p. 73).

Hankins suggests that not only Muslim authors either intentionally or unintentionally include Islam and Muslim cultures in their speculative writings but non-Muslims as well. Some examples of the popular ones would be Star Wars, Star Trek, and Dune. This shows how non-Muslim writers and producers have successfully popularised Muslim cultures

and contexts; however, we are left with a greater task as Muslim scholars: to explore works by Muslim authors and issues surrounding Islam. Hankins also reminds us that "one of the greatest examples of paranormal time travel is the account of the Prophet's ascension from Jerusalem to Paradise while sitting in the Great Mosque in Jerusalem; for Muslims, these ideas were neither strange nor foreign" (p. 74). This is undoubtedly one of the most important stories in the *sīrah* of Prophet Muhammad, as this is the historic scenario where the ruling about *ṣalāh*, the five prayers, was instructed upon all human beings. Yet, interestingly, this particular *sīrah* takes the form of a subgenre in speculative writing, which is time traveling, or in some cases, a slipstream. Hankins also views that Muslim writers of science fiction and fantasy are not entirely different from non-Muslim writers when constructing stories. We are more well versed about Marvel and DC characters such as Iron Man, Captain America, Batman, and Spiderman, which has led us to forget or put aside stories that are Muslim and Islamic-centred like the *Arabian Nights* and *A Thousand and One Nights*. These stories also incorporate speculative themes of futurism, magic realism, space travel, and other subgenres, and at the same time include faith as an integral theme and message of their stories.

Other scholarly works on speculative fiction and Islam focus on feminist and gender perspectives. Noor Hashem's article entitled "Muslim American Speculative Fiction: Figuring Feminist Epistemologies, Religious Histories, and Genre Traditions" (2021) examines the agentive role of Muslim heroines in the works of women Muslim writers such as G. Willow Wilson and how writers demonstrate feminist epistemologies in their work. Hashem argues that the increasing number of Muslim American women writers has a challenge ahead of them as they must navigate various politics of representation and anti-Muslim rhetoric that exist in America (p. 169). In doing so, Hashem raises important considerations such as how these works, which are inspired by Muslim histories and cultures, engage with representational politics that tend to typify Islam and stereotype Muslims, with Muslim women getting the brunt of such treatment. Much like Hashem, Noureddine Bendouma's dissertation on Arab Muslim women in speculative fiction examines various iterations of feminism, particularly secular and Islamic feminisms, that shape how Arab Muslim women are represented. Referencing Abdel Aziz's *The Queue* (2013), Mauren F.

McHugh's *Nekropolis* (2001), and G. Willow Wilson's *Alif the Unseen* (2012), Bendouma highlights how representations of Islam and Arab Muslim women have been at the mercy of androcentric readings that perpetuate the idea that Islam is backward and misogynist. Bendouma also states that whilst Abdel Aziz's texts critique the patriarchal structures that trap and marginalise women, he also points out that works such as McHugh's place the blame for the oppression of women on Islam (Bendouma, p. 206).

Most, if not all, of the scholarly literature surveyed points to a critique and challenge to master narratives concerning Islam and Muslims that can be seen in texts written by Muslim and non-Muslim authors. Despite taking into account various approaches, perspectives and premises including feminism and history, these papers have not integrated Qur'anic and Ḥadīth literatures, *sīrah* and Islamic jurisprudence as a fluid framework from which the literary texts could be interpreted. Hence, this project endeavours to explore how these bodies of Islamic knowledge could be used to study speculative writing by Muslims to unpack the various ways Muslim authors represent their faith.

Sacred Landscapes and Fragmented Lives: The Study of the Spiritual Metamorphosis in *Bird Summons*

Bird Summons is an interesting example of a growing corpus of speculative fiction in English that is written by Muslim authors due to the diversity of the genre, and it is considered a work of speculative writing, particularly magic realism, largely due to its inclusion of myths, fantastical, and supernatural elements, which appear in an otherwise normal setting. The novel is perhaps Aboulela's first foray into speculative writing and is a departure from her body of work, as her body of work suggests an inclination towards literary and historical fiction.

The novel concerns Salma, Moni, and Iman – three Muslim women who are making their way on a pilgrimage to the Scottish Highlands to visit Lady Evelyn Cobbold's grave (also known by her Muslim name as Zainab Cobbold), a White Scottish woman who had embraced Islam in 1915. Salma, Moni, and Iman's pilgrimage to Lady Cobbold's grave reflects a growing real-life trend of British Muslims all over the British Isles making that trip to the Scottish Highlands (Cox, 2022). For these

women, who are migrants to the UK, see Lady Cobbold as a source of inspiration because she was the first white British woman to perform the Ḥajj in Makkah. They also found that her reconciliation between her Scottish aristocratic background and her identity as a Muslim woman is motivating, especially when these women are forced to navigate their religious and cultural identities in the UK. Lady Cobbold being Muslim is an anchor that Salma, Moni, and Iman need.

The pilgrimage to Lady Cobbold's grave presents a spiritual quest where each woman is forced to confront their fears, desires, and shortcomings as a way they metamorphosise spiritually. Pilgrimage holds important historical, cultural, and spiritual importance in both Islamic and British cultures. From an Islamic perspective, pilgrimage is not merely a ritual or custom but is an important pillar of Islam. As the fifth pillar of Islam, it holds a chief position in the life of Muslims and global Islamic history and is a mandatory religious duty to be completed at least once for every able-bodied and financially able Muslim. Another form of pilgrimage is called the *ʿUmrah*, which is non-obligatory. The third type of pilgrimage familiar to Muslims is called *Ziyārah*, which means a visit to often important and pious figures in Islamic history, as a way Muslims are reminded of their faith and the Hereafter (Muslim, Ḥadīth 977). Similarly, pilgrimage holds a significant place in British history as it was a dominant feature of Christian life. During the Medieval period, for example, pilgrimages to key Christian sites in Britain were perceived as an important way a Christian could express their sense of piety (Sorabella, 2011). Chief among these key sites is the Shrine of Sir Thomas Becket, where pilgrimages to this shrine were made famous by Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (1476).

One of the major aspects of the novel lies in its representation of the pilgrimage as a framework for a spiritual quest for the three main characters in the novel. Salma, Moni, and Iman are all beleaguered by crises that are rooted in their difficulties with their religious, cultural, and gender identities, forcing them to interrogate and confront their greatest desires and fears. Thus, Aboulela recentres the idea of pilgrimage beyond the literary motif or as a parallel to Christian understanding of pilgrimage by problematising what entails within the Islamic understanding of pilgrimage: *jihād al-nafs* and *tazkiyyah al-nafs* which is the struggle and purification of the soul, *ṣabr* or patience, and *tawakkul* which concerns placing one's trust in God. All three

women are confronted with different trials that force them to experience these various processes, underscoring the idea that from an Islamic perspective, pilgrimage goes beyond the physical journey and becomes a transformative inner journey to purify the soul.

The pilgrimage to Lady Cobbold's grave in Inverness can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, it can be viewed as *hijrah*, whereby it is a migration for spiritual renewal. Secondly, it is viewed as a form of *jihād al-nafs* or struggle against the self.

This transformative inner journey is articulated in different phases in the novel. The first of these is the acceptance of the journey as a form of *hijrah* or migration. At the beginning of the novel, readers are told that Salma had arranged for members of the Arabic Speaking Muslim Women's Group to visit Lady Cobbold's grave as a way to "honour Lady Evelyn Cobbold…to educate themselves about the history of Islam in Britain, to integrate better by following the example of those who were of this soul and of their faith, those for whom this island was an inherited rather than adopted home" (p. 1).

Spiritual Restlessness

At an initial glance, Salma, Moni, and Iman are seen as archetypical figures representing different struggles in the lives of diasporic Muslim women of colour in the UK. However, Aboulela challenges these surface identities by placing each woman within a pilgrimage narrative that ultimately exposes each character's spiritual deficiencies and their transformation as a result.

Salma is initially presented to the reader as the character who is the most financially and emotionally secure. She works as a successful physiotherapist, has a loving husband, and healthy children. Despite all of these, Salma is challenged by moments of spiritual weakness and discontent. Her dangerous and provocative game of encouraging Iman and Moni to confess what major sins they might commit if there were no punishment or consequences (p. 26) hints at *nafs ʿammārah*, which is an inclination to sin. This game is a highly dangerous one as it makes sin trivial and entertains the possibility of sin without accountability. From an Islamic perspective, entertaining sin is not a harmless activity. Instead, it is a form of heedlessness and distances the soul from remembrance of Allah.

This is again demonstrated when Salma initiates and maintains a flirtatious online communication with her former boyfriend Amir not because of the desire to be loved, which is something she receives from her husband, but a craving for thrill and validation. Along the journey, her conversations with Amir become increasingly risky, as Amir begins to ask for details such as her whereabouts and address, and when Salma does not offer the information he wants, he threatens to find her anyway (p. 164). This slow betrayal of her relationship is manifested physically in the novel when her phone, the device that enables her liaison with Amir, begins to emit a pungent smell coming from a brand new handphone gifted to her by her husband only recently. This is made worse by visions of her past and the sacrifices she has made with her choices. This demonstrates not only Salma's ingratitude but also her inability to accept *tawakkul,* which is trust in God's judgment. She has numerous blessings in her life, but she takes all of these for granted and risks everything she has built for a fleeting feeling as she entertains "what if" scenarios about her life and her relationship with Amir. This seemed like a summon made by the Hoopoe bird in the novel, who is a reference from Farid ud-Din Attar's *The Conference of the Bird*s, a mysterious bird who guides Iman specifically with stories and wisdom, much like how the Hoopoe bird guides the other birds in Attar's tale.

One of the Hoopoe's stories to Iman seems to encapsulate Salma's dilemma. At the beginning of the story, the bird explained that evil is often frozen not because people do not intend to commit it, but because there are limited means to do so (p. 170). The story about a snake catcher embodies the nature of lust and greed that lie dormant and the consequences of toying with them. The new phone becomes a means to commit the sin of betrayal, just like how the Hoopoe bird explains to Iman in his story.

Moni's life represents another type of test. Unlike Salma, Moni does not enjoy marital affection from her husband or experience domestic harmony. Additionally, Adam suffers from long-term health issues, and Moni exerts every ounce of her strength to take care of him. Her husband, who is often emotionally detached, particularly after Adam's birth, has left her to shoulder the burden of caring for Adam alone as he works in Saudi Arabia, whilst attempting to secure visas for his family. On top of this, Moni tirelessly cares for Adam, whose long-term health problems require her constant attention and energy.

Through these circumstances, Moni is not only tested through her marriage, but also her role as a mother and the fragility of her lineage. Her husband's emotional detachment and Adam's illness wear her heavily, so much so that she no longer cares for herself. These burdens require a sense of *tawakkul* and *ṣabr*. Nonetheless, they force her into a state of despair as she worries obsessively about Adam losing her identity and existence outside his needs. In this way, Moni exemplifies the human tendency to despair when tested. She initially could not see the Divine Wisdom present in her many sufferings. This intense inner turmoil surfaces in Moni's thoughts during Salma's game, where she envisions, at first, killing Murtada but then reconsiders and decides that perhaps she should kill herself and bring Adam along with her. These dark thoughts not only reveal the depth of her despair but also her struggle to reconcile her faith, hardship, and meaning in times of trouble.

At the loch, Moni discovers a child who strangely resembles Adam, albeit a healthier version of her son. This is interpreted as the Hoopoe's summons for Moni. This is the other indication of how the boundaries between the real world, magical, and spiritual are blurred, as there is little explanation of whether this boy is real or imagined. As Moni is highly tied to her role as a mother who yearns for her son and worries about his well-being, this boy could be a mirror for Moni to see herself and understand her identity outside her motherhood. Furthermore, the portrayal of a Hoopoe bird telling metaphorical stories throughout Salma, Moni, and Iman's journey resembles the story of the Hoopoe and Prophet Sulayman in the Qur'an. This can be seen in *Sūrah Al-Naml* where the Hoopoe bird was the messenger of Prophet Sulayman to deliver a message to the Queen of Sheba (Balqis).

Moni's life is framed as a constant test of her patience and sense of *tawakkul* in God's Will. Within the Islamic tradition, Prophet Muhammad states that patience is a spiritual light (Muslim 223) which illuminates the believer's path towards Allah S.W.T. through hardship. Trials and tribulations are, therefore, not necessarily earthly punishments or obstacles, but a means of spiritual purification and nearness to the Divine. However, Moni has not demonstrated this spiritual resilience and is, instead, beleaguered by a sense of helplessness. Rather than transforming her hardship into spiritual growth, she becomes stagnant

and immobilised by it, indicating the strain between seeing hardship as a transformative and redemptive force and the lived reality of overwhelming struggle and hardship. Moni's detachment from visiting Lady Evelyn's grave and her immediate concern to spend time with the other version of Adam at the loch symbolise her unreadiness to fully open herself up to self-examination.

Iman, the youngest of the three, is a character who symbolises freedom and rebellion. Back in Syria, Iman was married to a man who had later died during the Assad uprising. Later in the UK, she marries a man who only desires her for her beauty and later leaves her at the behest of his parents. Iman's desire to be free is expressed firstly through her rejection of the *ḥijāb*, which she interprets as a rejection of both cultural and religious identities. However, the freedom Iman decides to pursue is secular and individualistic in character, which privileges her personal desires over accountability. This limitation is foreshadowed in her earlier warning to Salma during their drive to the loch when she rebukes Salma by saying, "there is no sin that I *want* to do" (p. 28) other than not be accountable to other people. Iman's feelings of rebellion concretely manifest when she decides to undertake a physical transformation by "She had taken the ferry and then the bus to the nearest town, walked into a hair salon and demanded a bob like that of Lady Evelyn" (p. 166), demonstrating her willingness to let go of the veil. For Iman, who has been constantly treated as a pet by her husbands, she may have perceived the veil as a marker of her invisibility. Al-Karawi and Bahar (2014), in their examination of Aboulela's novel, *Minaret* (2005), argue that the veil represents the struggle Muslim women experience in order to be spiritually and religiously faithful.

This act of rebellion and renewal, however, is funded through dubious means as she steals money from Moni (p. 167), a woman who is struggling to care for her ill son whilst her husband works abroad. This exhibits that Iman's sense of freedom is, therefore, not free of consequences and relies on the exploitation of her friend. This pursuit of freedom and a new self is tested when she discovers a magical wardrobe full of dresses and costumes found in their lodging. This wardrobe is filled with costumes such as the ones from *Cinderella* and *Star Wars* with each costume showcasing her temptation to assume new identities grounded in fantasy.

From an Islamic perspective, the danger of Iman's desires lies in severing freedom from submission to Allah S.W.T. Islam warns about the limitations of this type of life pursuits because it removes the necessary submission to Allah, where she risks everything with her servitude to her desires. This tension culminates with Iman's magical realist metamorphosis into an animal, which may be an indicator of *Nafs al-ʿAmmārah*, which is also known as *Nafs al- Hayawāniyyah*, or the Animal Self. This is the self that is controlled by base desires and the desire for the material (Rosalina, 2023). Iman, however, is not the only character who experiences metamorphosis in the novel. Moni transforms into a Swiss ball to showcase her physical exhaustion and need for self-care. Moni's transformation may be interpreted from an Islamic perspective to mean the need for spiritual grounding to be the centre of self-care. Salma, however, metamorphosises into a flat and two-dimensional object, an indicator of her penchant for denial and self-repression. This can be read as a form of spiritual stagnation or deficiency due to her lack of depth.

Consequently, Salma becomes the only one of the three women to reach Lady Evelyn Cobbold's grave. Unlike Moni and Iman, who are constantly preoccupied with their personal struggles. Salma demonstrates an openness to confront her inner conflicts and struggles. Her persistence in reaching Lady Evelyn's grave suggests Salma's positive trait, which is her strong perseverance. This foregrounds the concept of *jihād al-nafs*, which is the struggle of the self, thus positioning Salma as the character who is most open and prepared to reflect upon her feelings and actions. This also suggests that there is always a possibility for redemption and forgiveness, which is a core Islamic concept.

The novel employs magical realist elements which resonate with the Islamic metaphysics, especially the concept of *Ghayb* or the Unseen. In contrast to Western concepts of fantasy, which is often perceived as grounded in the imaginary or unreal, the *ghayb* is real in an ontological sense. The Unseen is mentioned in the Qur'an in *Sūrah Al-Baqarah*: "This is the Scripture in which there is no doubt, containing guidance for those who are mindful of God, who believe in the unseen, keep up prayer and give out of what We have provided for them (Qur'an 2: 2-3). On the other hand, the concept of *Qaḍāʾ* and *Qadar* (divine decree and predestination) can be considered as an unseen element in

Bird Summons; the journey to Lady Cobbold's grave evokes themes of death and what lies beyond (Unseen), indirectly reminding the principal characters, Salma, Moni, and Iman, of the afterlife (*ākhirah*). Their pilgrimage to the grave of Lady Cobbold in the Scottish Highlands is not merely a geographical movement, but a contemplative passage or spiritual reckoning that foregrounds mortality, resembling a Muslim's temporary voyage in this world.

Conclusion

Leila Aboulela's *Bird Summons* may initially appear to be a typical addition to speculative fiction and magical realism. A deeper inspection of the novel's themes via Islamicisation of Knowledge as a literary framework reveals an alternative narrative. The journeys of Salma, Moni, and Iman are not just stories about diasporic Muslim women who are constantly negotiating their Muslim identities in Britain. Rather, the novel is a dramatisation of how the human soul continuously struggles against feelings of restlessness, despair, and heedlessness.

The pilgrimage serves as a mirror that forces the women to confront not only the fractures in their identities but also their own spiritual deficiencies. Aboulela shows how the journey to Lady Evelyn Cobbold's grave exposes hidden desires and disappointments and thus makes the trip a sort of allegorical journey that exhibits the soul's unrest.

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Journal Article

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Chapra (2002)

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Chapra, M. U. (2002). Islam and the international debt problem. *Journal of Islamic Studies, 10*, 214-232.

The Qur'ān

In-text:

(i) direct quotation, write as 30:36

(ii) indirect quotation, write as Qur'ān, 30:36

Reference:

The glorious Qur'ān. Translation and commentary by A. Yusuf Ali (1977). US: American Trust Publications.

Ḥadīth

In-text:

(i) Al-Bukhārī, 88:204 (where 88 is the book number, 204 is the ḥadīth number)

(ii) Ibn Hanbal, vol. 1, p. 1

Reference:

(i) Al-Bukhārī, M. (1981). *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr.

(ii) Ibn Ḥanbal, A. (1982). *Musnad Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal*. Istanbul: Cagri Yayinlari.

The Bible

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Matthew 12:31-32

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