



Exploring Islamic Reformation in Leila Aboulela and Tariq Ali's Novels Through Social Dominance Orientation

Samra Abdul Rehman^a, Maleeha Zahid^{*b}, Aimen Munir^c

- a. M.Phil English Literature, Kinnaird College for Women University Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan
- b. Lecturer, Department of English, Green International University Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan
- c. M.Phil English Literature, Forman Christian College, University, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to explore how Islamic reformation can eradicate extremism and social dominance. For this purpose, it focuses on Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* and Tariq Ali's *Night of the Golden Butterfly*. The objective of this research is to inspect as to how the Muslims living under unequivocal influences of socio-cultural paradigms develop different strategies to unite conventional Islamic values with the contemporary world hence instigating Islamic reformation. Thus, it intends to defy negative discourse against Islam and Muslims. This study fills the gap in research on Islamic reformation using the social dominance orientation. This research adheres to the framework of social dominance orientation used as a tool to counteract the stereotypical perceptions about Islam as a bigoted and violent religion. Thus, the data used highlights the significance of fiction in providing a better understanding of how the repositioning and reinterpretation of Islamic values plays a positive role in Muslims' lives. Future researchers can explore various dimensions of Islamic reformation to break the old perceptions about Islam through the works of different writers.

1. Introduction

In the present world, religion is being used by the individuals to unite and systematize people in a radicalized manner. Religion is also used to control political and cultural values, lifestyle and even thoughts, thus giving rise to religious extremism. Extremists willingly undertake such ruthless acts in the service of God by considering their enemies or "victims as the enemies of God" (Iannaccone 2).

It is a mistaken idea that religious extremism is a new phenomenon, whereas it existed hundreds of years ago. However, what we see today is unfortunately an extremely dangerous form of radicalization. Individuals are mobilized in the name of religion to commit acts of terrorism.

The violent extremists manipulate and modify religion in such a way as to rationalize their personal, social and political goals. The violent acts have resulted from variances in religious principles and scriptural interpretations (Johnson). With this said, if

* Correspondence to: Lecturer, Department of English, Green International University Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan

E-mail address: maleeha.zahid@giu.edu.pk (M. Zahid).

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-2285-735X>



we try to shift our focus to the literature being produced on this issue contemporarily, we come across writers who hold a different view about all this and depict it differently in their writings.

This research aims to explore how the Islamic reformation based on the “reinterpretation and renewal of our understanding of the sources . . .” (Lamrabet) can eradicate religious radicalism as well as the negative image of Islam. Thus, it intends to defy the clash over an ideology and the discourse against Islam and Muslims. This study fills the gap in research on Islamic reformation using social dominance orientation.

The main objective of this research is to trace the strategies adopted by these writers to portray a union of conventional Islamic values with the contemporary world resulting from Islamic reformation.

The important research questions are based on the theory, the conceptual framework of Islamic reformation and how these ideas are incorporated into the texts under consideration. It raises questions which are answered in discussion and analysis. These include, what is social dominance orientation? How social dominance orientation promotes discrimination and oppression within and between groups? What is Reza Aslan’s concept of Islamic reformation and how it promotes peace and decrease social dominance in these novels? How these writers unite conventional Islamic values with the contemporary world to counter the social dominance enhancing ideologies through Islamic reformation? How Islamic reformation transforms non-religious people into religious people in these novels?

This research is significant because it aims to break the negative stereotypical perceptions about Islam. These perceptions are the result of social dominance orientation. The research also emphasizes the need to look upon Islamic Reformation. As, the reformation is already taking place in the form of a clash within Islam, this study shows the need to eradicate the emerging extremism through a “certain methodology to interpreting the Quran” (Corbin) and “formal education in Islamic law” (Aslan, 2009). So, this research intends to bring forth the avenue to get rid of extremism and social dominance which is taking over the world and causing threat to our national and global security (Rafaq et al., 2025).

The data used in this research work highlights the significance of fiction in providing a better understanding of how the repositioning and reinterpretation of Islamic values through a certain methodology plays a positive role in Muslims’ lives. Future researchers can explore various dimensions of Islamic reformation to break the old perceptions about Islam through the works of different writers.

2. Literature Review

It reviews literature related to Leila Aboulela and Tariq’s Ali’s writings and the the strain, social dominance orientation, of Social Dominance theory put forth by Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto. Social dominance orientation is an important individual-difference variable that leads to the acceptance or denial of ideologies that encourage or reduce inequality and oppression (Pratto et al., 1994, p. 741). It is further divided into two subdimensions, one that supports “intergroup dominance” and the other assists “intergroup antiegalitarianism” (Ho et al., 2015, p. 1004). So, it basically demonstrates the systematic processes and factors that form or break the dynamic system of societal inequality and which is made clear in this research work through different references from the primary texts.

This research aims to explore how the two writers, Leila Aboulela and Tariq Ali, challenge the negative image of Islam promoted through social dominance orientation in their writings. This study borrows Reza Aslan’s framework of “Islamic Reformation” from his book, *No god but God*, in order to cover the increasingly complex issue of religious extremism, which seems much more relevant in the contemporary world. Reza Aslan, A Harvard educated scholar of religions in his book, *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*, argues about Islamic reformation by saying that his book is an argument for reform and like all other reformations, it can be a frightening event, however, indeed the one that can lead to an amicable resolution to the contemporary issues which overwhelm the world today. In so doing, he tries to shift the concentration merely on regional issues to incorporate a globalized world view for the resolution of these issues. Thus, Reza Aslan challenges the misrepresentations about Islam and argues that the violent acts being done in different parts of the world are primarily the outcome of an internal strife between Muslims over an ideology. Thus, he believes that this is not so much “a cultural conflict as a religious one...” (Aslan, 2005, p. 16).

The literary works, *Minaret* and *Night of the Golden Butterfly*, have succeeded in attracting a wide range of attention from critics. The research has been done on these novels separately, but the way in which these two novels are taken together, to counter the view of religious extremism through reformation using social dominance orientation is different and new, as this research shows. Former researches on the novels, under study, are slightly relevant to my paper. The critic/researcher Sadia Abbas in her article, “Leila Aboulela, Religion, and the Challenge of the Novel”, particularly focuses on Aboulela’s first novel, *The Translator* and Nadeem Aslam’s *Maps for Lost Lover*. Abbas at one point also talks about *Minaret* and says, “*Minaret* and

The Translator are allegories of the left's defeat: they offer Marxists who are vanquished by Islam" (Abbas, 2011, p. 445). This article explores that Najwa, represents Islam as a religion capable of making peace with the West, in contrast to the aggressively hostile behavior of the leftist (Anwar) who has burned the American flag. So, this article though portrays Islam as a nonviolent and worldwide religion, it mainly focuses on the harmonious relationship between Islam and West. But, my research aims to portray particularly the religious identities as being tolerant and rational towards social dominance and extremism thus, countering the negative perceptions about Islam.

Another researcher, Peter Morey in his work, "Halal fiction and the limits of post secularism: Criticism, critique and the Muslim in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*" states that "Minaret reveals the difficulty of attempting to move the secular individualist form of the novel back to its spiritual roots...." (Morey, 2017, p. 5). This article talks about the journey of an individual towards faith, but it fails to highlight the power and positivity of Islam.

The critics/researchers Sajid Ali, Nafees Pervez and Waseem Hassan Malik in their work, "The Secular Side of Islam: a Case Study of Tariq Ali's *Islam Quintet*" state that "The *Islam Quintet* takes us to different periods of history to show us the Islamic civilization which is rational, secular, progressive and tolerant...." (63). Thus, this research focuses on the Tariq Ali's *Islam Quintet* as a whole without particularly focusing on the *Night of the Golden Butterfly* and its characters who tackle extremism and dominance, by defending and understanding the real picture of Islam. Similarly, Reed Way Dasenbrock in "*Tariq Ali's Islam Quintet*" talks generally about his works. He says, "We view religious tolerance as a feature of our Western culture, not of Islamic culture, so the (accurate) assertion that our tradition of tolerance was better exemplified in the middle ages by Islam than by Christianity displaces our received fault lines a little" (15).

Overall, these articles and research papers while emphasizing the other themes of the novel generally miss the point being covered in my research. So, it can be concluded that, although different researches have been done on these two novels, none has been done in the same way before.

3. Methodology

The nature of this study is qualitative. This research is exploratory, and the type of data is phenomenological and subjective. It opens with a general introduction and then moves its focus gradually towards the main idea of Islamic Reformation. The study is inductive as the collected data is stated first and afterwards a conclusion is drawn from it. The texts under consideration are analyzed by using theoretical framework of social dominance orientation along with the conceptual framework of Islamic reformation.

The research method adopted to investigate and interpret the texts of two primary novels, *Minaret* and *Night of the Golden Butterfly* is explicitly textual in its analysis as it provides interpretations of texts based on cultural and social contexts. One of the secondary texts used in this paper is *No God but God* and many other articles, books, interviews, videos, reviews, essays and other dissertations are used in the analysis.

The main problem which takes place during this research is the limited work of literature including thesis, articles and books being produced using social dominance orientation as a theoretical framework. Limited time and resources appear as the major constraints in carrying out the research which is completed in a period of two-three months.

4. Discussion and Analysis

The Social dominance orientation (SDO) is an important factor and micro-level aspect of Social Dominance theory that leads to an acceptance or rejection of group based social hierarchies. It is about one's degree of preference or the extent to which one desires for discrimination or inequality among social groups. An individual's SDO compels them to prefer ideologies that increase inequality (hierarchy-enhancing ideologies) or those which decreases inequality (hierarchy-attenuating ideologies). The theory argues that people who are more social dominance oriented will support hierarchy-enhancing myths (promote social inequality) whereas those lower on SDO will favor hierarchy-attenuating ideologies that promote social equality (Pratto et al. 741). Men are considered more social dominance oriented than women and are assumed to endorse beliefs in unequal societal system more than women. Furthermore, SDO is also considered as the "predictor of Islamophobic attitudes" and negative attitude towards Islam. The individuals with high level of SDO tend to reveal more anti-Muslim prejudice (Uenal, 2016, p. 72).

The textual analysis in this study expresses the perspectives of the writers (under consideration) on Islam and explores the ways in which they portray the positivity of religion in their writings. It shows how SDO promotes discrimination and oppression using hierarchy enhancing ideologies. In *Minaret*, Leila Aboulela illustrates an explicit picture of prejudice against Islam and Muslims in the post-9/11 London. As an illustration of radical or stereotypical views of Islam, hijab is misinterpreted as the signifier of a radical Islam. In *Minaret*, on a London bus, three young men annoys Najwa (protagonist). They are irritated

at the sight of her hijab, identifying her as a Muslim woman and poured the cool liquid (Tizer) on Najwa's veiled head and calls her a "Muslim scum" (Aboulela, 2005, p. 81)). Furthermore, when she spends time with the devout son of her employer, Tamer, she says that it gives her the slight unease he inspires in the people around them. She states, "I turn and look at him through their eyes. Tall, young, Arab-looking, dark eyes and the beard, just like a terrorist" (100). This scene highlights the role of hierarchy enhancing ideas about Muslims and Islam and one's degree of preference for inequality. SDO is strongly related to prejudice that "one's country is better than other countries, and as such should dominate other countries" and the "cultured-not cultured distinction" (Pratto et al. 742). So, hierarchy legitimizing myths such as Islam promotes terrorism and bigotry are used for the maintenance of hierarchy.

On the other hand, Tariq Ali in *Night of the Golden Butterfly*, portrays the violence of the Pakistan's rich and powerful Sindhi feudal lords who marry the courageous or brave Zaynab to the Quran. It is a scheme devised to protect their holdings or property from going out of the family. Furthermore, she states that in this ceremony "the local pir, a retarded pockmarked primitive..... declared my marriage to the Koran legal and holy" (Ali, 2014, p. 126). It shows gender exploitation in the name of religion, thus highlighting the evils of feudal tradition. This idea is more clearly depicted in the lines, "Zaynab had a real tale to tell, a story that had the Holy Book at its centre and the uses made of it by cruel and rapacious landlords to oppress their sisters and daughters" (176). Thus, as men are considered more social dominance oriented than women they hold hierarchy enhancing attitudes and "leadership roles in religious, social, political, and cultural spheres" (Pratto et al. 742). Moreover, it shows how men make immoral use of religion to oppress women and to maintain dominance to fulfil their personal as well as social needs. Thus, it refers to a subdimension of SDO which is "dominance subdimension (SDO-D)" which denotes a preference for group-based dominance hierarchies (742).

The Islamic reformation or reinterpretation of Islamic values is particularly based upon the question that who has the authority to define faith, the institution or the individual (Aslan, 2006). In this process of reformation, the passing of authority to interpret the Quran from the hands of Ulema to individuals has resulted in both positive and negative ways (Aslan, 2014a). This is best illustrated by the writers under consideration in their novels. Aslan's idea of Islamic reformation is seen throughout the novel as the religious characters, Tamer and Najwa, in the novel are not forced to adopt Islam. They have chosen Islam by themselves and after understanding it on their own. For instance, Najwa goes to the mosque to understand the religious or moral values and then consider these values in a larger social context. After considering and interpreting these values she gets to know that only Islam can provide her peace and compatibility with the modern European world. Similarly, Tamer has a collection of religious books. As Najwa states, In Tamer's room "There are books about Islam Books about Sufism, early Islamic history, the interpretation of the Quran" (Aboulela 99). These books help Tamer to understand Islam more clearly, thus, avoiding the chance of becoming a blind follower of fake Mullahs. The importance of understanding Islam to counter the hierarchy-enhancing myths or negative image of Islam and Muslims which the groups or people with high level of SDO-D promote to maintain their dominance over the world is emphasized. So, this novel portrays the positive result of Islamic reformation.

Raza Aslan's idea of Islamic reformation is also evident in *Night of the Golden Butterfly* through Plato. Plato tells his friends that "My family had been religious. I was taken regularly to the mosque, learned the Koran by rote without understanding a single word, and participated in all the rituals. When I saw what was being done by all sides in the name of religion I turned my back on religion forever" (Ali 34). Through these lines, Ali is trying to give a picture of a society where people are meant to learn Quran without understanding its meaning. Furthermore, it highlights the fact that the violent acts being done in the name of religion are due to the misinterpretation of the Quran and Islam. This in turn helps the hierarchy-enhancing myths appear as true not just for non-Muslims but also for Muslims with little knowledge of Islam. This shows the lack of or the negative result of violent interpretation of the Quran. Thus, these novels present Reza Aslan's idea that "So the individual who is going to the Quran on his or her own and coming up with these innovative interpretations that promote peace and feminism and tolerance and democracy is a reformer. But so is the individual who goes to the same source and comes up with an individual interpretation that promotes violence, bigotry and terror" (Aslan, 2014b).

The process of reformation also gives a picture of Islam which is compatible with the modern world and therefore counters the hierarchy-enhancing ideologies against Islam. In Aboulela's novel, *Minaret*, Najwa's adoption of Islam in the west shows that Islam is a global religion and not bound to a single community or country. Furthermore, it is the local mosque, which helps Najwa to establish a religious identity in a very modern and Western city, London. So, the novel counter the hierarchy-enhancing ideologies which view Islamic system as "... fanatical Islamic system that denies coexistence and tolerance with the West" (Said, 1981, p. 102).

Secondly, hijab is misinterpreted as a backward tradition and women wearing hijab are considered as oppressed. Whereas, in *Minaret*, Aboulela counters this perception through Najwa by portraying hijab or veil as a personal choice of an individual in which she finds a sense of order and protection rather than repression. Moreover, In *Night of the Golden Butterfly*, Ali reinforces

hierarchy-attenuating ideology through his character, Yusuf, who also wears hijab as her personal choice and considers it a “gesture of defiance” (193). She participates in a TV show and wins unexpectedly. So, it counters the myth that the girls wearing hijab are backward, less intelligent and dominated in Islam.

Islamic reformation or a deeper understanding of Islam works as hierarchy-attenuating ideology and rejects the social and political inequality between groups based on false myths to maintain dominance and superiority of one’s own group. In the novels, under consideration, the reform in thoughts converts non-religious and secular characters into religious ones. These writers depict Islam as a religion which liberates people from anxiety, trauma and depression. The peaceful and soothing effect of Islam fascinates individuals and persuades them to become religious. Leila Aboulela’s, *Minaret*, best illustrates this idea by demonstrating the experience of the Muslim woman, Najwa, as a diasporic subject who is constantly struggling with an identity crisis. She recovers from this diasporic anxiety by wearing the hijab and connecting herself to the mosque. Thus, she substitutes the sense of dislocation in London with a sense of belonging.

Therefore, Najwa’s embrace of Islam helps her to overcome the trauma of migration and loss. Furthermore, for Najwa, Islam becomes a way to restore her fractured self and turns her into a religious person from a secular individual. She endures a religious and spiritual awakening and true understanding of the religion that ultimately results in the self-empowerment.

Tariq Ali also portrays a young born-again Muslim or transformation of a person from secular to religious in *Night of the Golden Butterfly* through his character Neelam. The study not only shows how the writer decreases the hierarchy-enhancing myths or SDO favoring dominance but also portray power of Islam which counters trauma and distress in an individual’s life. For instance, in the novel, Neelam finds peace and a complete code of life in Islam. It helps her to come out of the trauma or emotional shock, which she experiences because of her husband’s infidelity. Thus, she only finds solace by connecting herself with religion. Ali depicts Neelam’s faith as a productive tool to counter sorrow and grief. Neelam’s husband’s late nights are “fuelled by alcohol and women” (205). So, she believes that becoming religious is the most suitable way to cope with life. As she says, “The children needed a set of rules... So I turned to the prophet. Mom thinks I’m a fanatic, but that is not true. I needed Allah to deal with Rafiq and his friends” (205). So, this highlights the idea of fanaticism related to the religion of Islam and at the same time this false myth is countered through adoption and admiration of Islam after understanding its true picture through reform in ideas and interpretation.

5. Conclusion

The above discussion concludes that the literature produced by the writers, Leila Aboulela and Tariq Ali, emphasizes upon the need for Islamic reformation. It is based on the reinterpretation of Islamic values to counter or decrease the hierarchy-enhancing myths created by individuals with high SDO level revealing anti-Muslim prejudice. Furthermore, it highlights how after re-understanding Islam, the characters become religious or born-again Muslims. It portrays Islam as a relief from anxious and traumatic state of mind of the divided selves of the characters. Thus, it represents the idea that Islam is not the basis of bigotry and violence, in fact, it is a source of recovery and mental stability for the individuals with a divided sense of self and it is compatible with modernity. Furthermore, it shows that Islam doesn’t teach violence and prejudice to its believers; they interpret it by themselves and for their own purposes. So, it shows the need of reinterpretation of Islamic values but through a reliable community of interpreters, with a certain methodology and knowledge of Islamic laws.

Both writers, through their characters, demonstrate radical as well as moderate/tolerant Muslims to portray Islam and radicalism as two different and in fact opposite ideologies. It shows that “Islam is just a religion. And like every religion in the world, it could be used to promote peace and to promote violence; it could be used to promote bigotry and to promote pluralism” (Alan). Furthermore, “religions are particularly prone to being harnessed to political ideologies” (Rautio). So, this research has explored how through literature the need for Islamic reformation is emphasized to counter hierarchy-enhancing social as well as political ideologies which contaminates the true picture of religion.

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