

## REDEFINING RELIGIOUS CONVENTIONS: WOMEN, FREEDOM AND THE NOTION OF 'HARAM' IN LEILA ABOULELA'S *BIRD SUMMONS*

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### Résumé :

*Cet article examine certains éléments relatifs à la redéfinition des conventions religieuses dans le roman Bird Summons de Leila Aboulela. La religion dans ce roman constitue la pierre angulaire. A travers une approche analytique, nous avons essayé de voir comment l'Islam a défini l'organisation des hommes dans laquelle la place de la femme est négligée. Cette dernière, pusillanime et timorée n'avait pas de force parce qu'elle était encore ligotée, par le patriarcat symbolisé par l'homme. Aboulela, une romancière avertit de par sa carrière et son itinéraire sans équivoque semble vouloir donner une nouvelle orientation sociale à travers une lecture rigoureuse sur l'interprétation religieuse. Dans ce roman, celle met en exergue la vie de trois femmes Salma, Moni et Iman qui sont toutes libres et épanouies. A travers une approche féministe, elle donne de la force à ses protagonistes et la légitimité de traduire le Quran et redéfinir ce que l'Islam orthodoxe avait établi sous l'influence du patriarcat. Nous avons entre autres trouvé que la religion est une construction sociale qui doit aussi s'adapter au contexte actuel. Les choses ont changé et la place de la femme doit forcément être reconsidérée. Toutefois, la liberté dont parlent certaines femmes Africaines aujourd'hui risque d'être une vraie dérive vers un monde où ni la morale, ni l'éthique ne seront respectées. Dans un pays comme celui-là, penser à un développement ne sera donc qu'une utopie.*

**Mots clés :** Religion-Liberté- Patriarcat- Haram- Féminisme

## **Abstract:**

*This article examines elements related to the redefinition of religious conventions in Leila Aboulela's Bird Summons. Religion in this novel constitutes the cornerstone. Through an analytical approach, we have tried to see how Islam has defined life in which women's place is neglected. The latter, timid and fearful, lacked strength because the patriarchy symbolised by men still bound her. Aboulela, an experienced novelist due to her career and unequivocal path, appears to aim to provide a new social direction through a rigorous examination of religious interpretation. In this novel, she highlights the lives of three women: Salma, Moni, and Iman, who are all free and fulfilled. Through a feminist approach, she empowers her protagonists and legitimizes the redefinition of what orthodox Islam established under the influence of patriarchy. We have found that religion is a social construct that must also adapt to the current context. Things have changed, and the role of women must necessarily be reconsidered. However, the freedom that some African women speak of today risks being a real drift towards a world where neither morality nor ethics will be respected. In a country like that, thinking about development will therefore only be a utopia.*

**Key-words:** Religion-Freedom- Patriarchy- Haram- Feminism

## **Introduction**

African literature has known winding paths throughout history. Because of the several ordeals and nightmares the continent has gone through, its definition and very content has always been the subject of controversy. The issues of slavery, colonization and neo-colonization have contributed to this complexity. However, the case of women has been relegated to a second zone for so long. The female writer then was simultaneously finding her way through the jungle of African society and the world of fiction. In a context like this, Aboulela, like most modern female writers, extols a liberation from the yoke of already existing literary norms imposed either by the West or by men. In doing so, she delineates acute ways through the erasure of some hegemonic

henets and mushrooms the so long hidden thoughts women have. The issue of religion has always been one of the most evident realities that uphold beliefs and norms full of muteness and bigotry. Through her fiction, Leila Aboulela proposes a new way of seeing women and Islam; she sets new paradigms in the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures, where women have a say. To better deal with this topic, it will be of paramount importance to know how women, through the promotion of liberty, can redefine Islamic religious conventions previously set. However, some questions can be raised: to what extent should they do so? What will be the consequences of such a task? This study will investigate the chasm engendered by Islam and betoken a new religion where liberty and the notion of haram will be highlighted. It aims at flagging up a more liberal approach than the orthodox tenet that invaded the previous writings by considering the redefinition of Islamic religious conventions underlined in *Bird Summons* through the characters of three ladies, Salma, Iman and Moni. The study aims then at redefining and shielding the grievances caused by history, and seeing what are the limits of such a fight for women. This is what made Anna Chitando say in her: *"women African theologians and creative writers stand for the same struggle in order to prevent men using their religion be it traditional religion or Christianity to oppress their sisters"*<sup>1</sup>. This legitimizes women's fight. Gender, Feminism, Place and space are theories and concepts that have served us as scaffold to scrutinize problems and challenges faced by women so that appropriate solutions be brought. With an analytic approach, we will strive to highlight the social problems related to our topic. Aboulela claims to be an Arabic Feminist writer whereas her writings are subjected to several gossips originally labelled as being haram because of the environment, settings and place of literary production hence the choice of such approach. The

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<sup>1</sup> Chitando Anna and Chitando Ezra, weaving sisterhood: women African theologians and creation writers, *Exchange: Journal of Contemporary Christians in Context*, April, 2005 p.22

realities of the new age have bestowed advantages so Aboulela is no longer "*Writing Back*" theorised by Edward Said and Frantz Fanon, who argued Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* who accused Africa and Africans of being savages. She rather militates to repudiate some of the most serious elements of male cultural and religious misconceptions, providing hence something unique.

## **1. Religious Conventions and Norms**

From the Latin *religare* (to bind in the sense of an obligation) religion is defined by the French sociologist Emile Durkheim as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, set apart and forbidden, beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community..."(1915). It is then set by people to regulate, punish and reward. To live in harmony and peace, these parameters are much needed. Throughout history, people have consistently established rules to find security. However, the majority of those norms are set to satisfy or favour men to the detriment of women, and this has influenced a lot on social organization.

### **1.1 Islamic Orthodoxy and Religious Misconception**

Islam emerged around 622 CE when the Prophet Muhammad migrated to Medina. His preaching was positively appraised, and people gave credit to him because of his zeal and sense of sacrifice. The majority of those who were under him were men, apart from his wives, which gave them a privileged place. Most of his teachings were weened to be male-centred. This male-centeredness is not new in religion; Islam has just followed previous existing religions' footsteps by giving men authority over women and making them second-class citizens. In these verses of the Quran, men's responsibility is much underlined:

Men are the caretakers of women, as men have been provisioned by Allah over women and tasked with supporting them financially. And righteous women are devoutly obedient and, when alone, protective of what Allah has entrusted them with.<sup>1</sup> And if you sense ill-conduct from your women, advise them 'first', 'if they persist,' do not share their beds, 'but if they still persist,' then discipline them 'gently'.<sup>2</sup> But if they change their ways, do not be unjust to them. Surely Allah is Most High, All-Great<sup>2</sup>.

This teaching grants men power and gives them the whip hand over women. Inside and outside the house, men's words must be followed and considered. It is visible that orthodoxy in Islam has something to do with misinterpretation. Some men, through their phallocratic and jingoistic attitudes, have taken these teachings without caring about their understanding and scope. This has brought real demand from women who stand up, resettle and rehabilitate the true reading and interpretation of the Quran whose original message seems to be corrupted. *Bird Summons* is a religious female novel that sets about the issue of women, their ideology, feelings and attitudes towards religion. In this novel, Aboulela has given them power in a society that has defined and tailored their agenda. They shall not speak; they shall not oppose men in order not to be cast out of the house or be cursed either by their husbands or by Allah. The Murtadas' slant shows this low down when Moni gave birth to an unwanted child, Adam, who unfortunately happened to be disabled. This disability behoves her because of her lack of compliance and resignation, this is what Aboulela said: "Eventually they did go to Sudan for Murtada's brother's wedding, but people were so unkind about Adam, so blatantly curious, at turns blaming her (it had to be someone's fault) and pitying her, that she was miserable" L. Aboulela (2019, p.16). This comes in a context when she refuses sex and obedience to her husband. Sex in Islam, inside the bounds of

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<sup>2</sup> Qur'an surat An-nisa, 4 :3

marriage, represents one of the most important requirements from both sides, but above all from women. Islam teaches that women must fulfil their husband's sexual needs unless they are menstruating or during the forty days following their childbirth, a time when they are considered impure. But only then do they have the legal right to refuse. Muhammad reports in his blog *The Importance of Satisfying Men's Sexual Desire*, what the Prophet said: "Men have a right over their wives. Women should not refuse to have intimacy with their husbands and should not disobey them"<sup>3</sup>. The reason for that, according to the *hadiths*<sup>4</sup>, is that if they distance themselves from their husband, the latter may come to hate them or be trapped in a love affair with another woman who might be closer. Consequently, this can bring about crossed wires and, in the long run, polygamy. In the same wavelength, Imam al Sadiq once said: "A woman went to the Prophet one day and asked, what is a man's right over his wife? His holiness replied, his wife must fulfil his sexual need, even if he is driving a vehicle"<sup>5</sup>. This can be considered a bit derogatory. In fact, the question asked was not to know what a woman shall do, but rather what men shall do; surprisingly, the answer brings women back to the centre, making them victims. The example given here is that even if she drives, she has to be ready to satisfy her husband sexually. Murtada, raised in a society or a religion like this, considers that his wife is cursed. Then comes the issue or misinterpretation because he could have tried to see if his wife is actually in a condition to have sexual intercourse, hence the importance of communication and consideration as well.

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<sup>3</sup> Muhammad, a Guide to Sexual Intercourse and its Rulings in Islam, *The Importance of Satisfying Men's Desire*, Islam Educational Platform chapter 12, April, 2025

<sup>4</sup> **Hadiths** are the **sayings, actions, and approvals of the Prophet Muhammad**, which serve as a major source of religious law and moral guidance in Islam. They are considered the second most important source of Islamic law after the Quran and were recorded by the Prophet's companions. Hadiths provide insights into the teachings and practices of Islam, helping Muslims in their daily lives.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1

Orthodoxy is about the true message of Islam that sets the principles people need to abide by, but it can also bring misconceptions because those principles may be male-constructed ones. A similar situation is found between Ibrahim and Iman, who got legally married without their parents' approval. They were enjoying their relationship when his parents unexpectedly came and obliged him to divorce. This conversation between Iman and Ibrahim shows how his father embodies hegemony. He does not even seem to want to understand his son's choice:

'They found out about us,' he said. 'They heard about it. I don't know how. Don't know who told them. But that's why they're here. That's why they came.' Iman's first thought was that he had come to fetch her, to take her back so that she could meet them. No need to hide. No need to be tucked away at the loch with Salma and Moni. 'My father is furious,' Ibrahim said. She was taken aback but still hopeful. 'He'll come round. Give him time. If he meets me—' 'No, you don't know him. He won't give you a chance. He's going to cut me off. (*op. cit.*, p. 42)

This scene is all the more telling because Ibrahim's father does not take into account his son's needs and feelings. He disregards Iman's situation and does not consider her as a human being. He does not care about all the harm, grief and sorrow he is causing in her life. What is this if not a lack of respect?

The interpretation of religion in Africa has an intrinsic relation with the issue of patriarchy. Many African societies have been patriarchal ones, but not patriarchy as seen today. There is the indigenous patriarchy; that one gives women power, honour and the respect they deserve in society. It highly differs from the colonial patriarchy seen from the angle of Victorian perception of gender. Africa itself was gendered during colonial times and even before, labelled and epitomised as being a woman. So it has to remain silent, passive, and subjected to obsequiousness. This has its remnants in the African people who have understood and interpreted religion throughout history. In *Women at Point Zero*

by Nawal El Saadawi for example, the same issue is much underlined where religious misinterpretation fills the book and is hence related to a so-called true reading of Islam, regardless of time and space. Firdaus in this master piece has gone through extreme pain because of a society that is led by men and that has set their norms to satisfy the vicious plans of the latter. In doing so, orthodoxy becomes a misinterpreted religion that does not give women a word in society. From then on, women will stand up to legitimise a fair fight, that of having a deserved place in society.

### **1.2 Women, Islam and Society**

Women have always played a major role in society. Their responsibility as mothers, daughters, wives and sisters has always brought stability in and within families. In some African traditions where matriarchy reigned over patriarchy and where these concepts were not gendered, women had a great trustworthiness. This reality is deeply rooted in the history of Africa. When the white man first came, only men were given the chance to learn, and added to that, their religious interpretation differed from what Africans had. However, the white man was to be taken for granted. Generally, when people think about religion, they think first about men. In the Christianity and Islam, the prophets are always men, even if there are some women who through their lives and devotion, played a remarkable role; the epitome is done by men. Some verses in the Bible and in the Quran may be challenging today and hard to be accepted by women. Each one is promoting their position, men through their patriarchal system, always consider religion as their own and that, they have to make women know about, follow and obey. Religion is a social organization that is misunderstood, so time has come now that women shall speak. Speak to strive to set back the truth first and second to remind the world of their place in society. Women in *Bird Summons* are given full swing as they take the lead through undertaking



initiatives that will ultimately change their future and destiny. They have understood by the way that if they want to, exist and be heard, they must get united. They are engaged in political matters to change their status quo. Here, women are on the front pages, they are not involved directly into political matters, but referring to what politics originally meant, *Politikos* in Greek *polis* or Latin *Civitas* (*the activities that are aimed at improving people's lives within a country*) women play a great role. In the novel, no men are shown; a group of women have undertaken a pilgrimage, and they have undertaken this without the advice or agreement of their husbands. This has been a big challenge. They have put an end to the everlasting belief that only men can think religiously. By opening this door, they have freed all the captive souls, bound in the manacles of male social constructions. The first lines of this novel show how women are organized to better their conditions and also their country:

She had hired a coach, then when the women started pulling out after the anger over the photo, a minibus, then when the numbers fell still further, a people carrier, then when there was just the three of them, Salma decided to take her own car. She had fought a battle and lost. The next time the Arabic Speaking Muslim Women's Group held their annual election, she would be voted out and someone else would be in charge. (*op. cit.*, p. 1)

They are Arabic women and they have thought of creating a Muslim group. They are organizing an election, which shows that they have understood the very issue of unity; they cannot be strong, and they cannot achieve their goals, if they are not united. Here, reigns the atmosphere of democracy where they all trust the decision of the majority. This is the very reflection of what should happen in any country; there is no violence here, no self-interest. The one who is the best will be chosen, and all of them will abide by the rules set by the community. This asset is a true redefinition of Islam because, basically, Islamic principles are not tied to democracy but rather to kingdomship or prophecies. A

prophet does not forcibly do things on behalf of the viewpoint of the majority. So, choosing a democratic way of life is a new way of seeing Islam. In *The Kindness of Enemies*, Aboulela's narration has given light to what women are able to do and their responsibilities in state management. Natasha has undertaken a great mission, that of showing and making known an important figure. All here is about women and religion. Their ideology, their feelings and attitudes and their interpretation, without being under the yoke of male hegemony. Contrary to some of her novels, this time, all the women are trying to pursue a kind of dream on a pilgrimage. And that person happens surprisingly not to be an Arab, not a man but a woman and a white; Evelyn Cobbold, the first British woman who performed the pilgrimage to Mecca. This is the opportunity for Aboulela not only to link the two separated sides: Islam and the West, but also to make people understand that, in the past, some white people loved and embraced Islam. Aboulela undoubtedly is promoting a new Islam, an Islam where there is acceptance and integration, an Islam different from what happens in Sudan, Nigeria with Bokko Haram, an Islam that does not segregate. An Islam that respects others and welcomes them without shooting at them, without obliging them to confess what they do not believe. That Evelyn though white, is the reference of all the women because of what she had achieved. In her arguments in the Arabic Speaking Women Muslim group, she says: 'We might never understand what it's like to be the eldest daughter of the seventh Earl of Dunmore or to have a town house in Mayfair and a 15,000-acre estate in the Highlands, but Lady Evelyn was a woman like us, a wife and a grandmother. She worshipped as we worshipped, though she kept her own culture, wore Edwardian fashion, shot deer and left instructions for bagpipes to be played at her funeral. She is the mother of Scottish Islam and we need her as our role model. (op. cit., p. 6) She is reminding of the very principles of Islam, being a wife, and a grandmother but as Leopold Sedar SENGHOR the former

Senegalese president said: *'le Rendez- vous du donner et du recevoir'*<sup>6</sup> (the *Rendez- vous of give and take*). This is a real meeting where one takes and learns from the others and where the others learn and receive. In combining these two things, only then, can people build an everlasting relationship, where limits are respected and liberty is considered. Evelyn worshipped as we worshipped, though she kept her own culture, wore Edwardian fashion, shot deer and left instructions for bagpipes to be played at her funeral. She adapted Islam to her own context, the reality of faith is actually what people feel in their inner person, not forcibly what can be seen. So Islam here teaches tolerance and open-mindedness. Margot Badran in the introduction of her book *Gender and Islam in Africa* gives a mapping of African women and Islam, highlighting the force they had before colonization. However, with the arrival of the white man, things were turn upside down because of the misunderstanding of the white sorcerer, whose interpretation of our system of belief and thought was accepted. She said:

However, in the more recent times and especially under colonization and in the process of modernization and new state Building(included different forms of institutionalizing knowledge) women scholars have largely disappeared in the in the public scene. Nonetheless as we shall see in more recent decades women have been returning to the fore of gaining visibility and respect as new dispensers of religion understanding. M. Badran (2011, pp. 4-5)

It is then clear, according to this quotation, that a new definition is not only needed but it is required. And women today struggle for freedom and consideration. They have learnt and some have found out that what was imposed on them is just but mere male construction that needs to be deconstructed. Moni, Salma and

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<sup>6</sup> Leopold Sedar Senghor, *Négritude et civilisation de l'Universel*, discours, conférences, Le seuil, 1977

Iman, as well as those at the Arabic Speaking Group are aware of their duty, and so they fight for their recognition and that of their likes. In more recent times, some other women have undertaken such duties. Africa shall always remember Nana Ama'u(1793-1864), a Fulani princess, poet and teacher who was the daughter of the founder of the Sokoto Caliphate in Nigeria. Because of her tireless fight and strong determination, and courage, she is an example for women in Islam. She toured the area around and educated women, thus giving them a way that is to be considered and taken for granted. So, according to what has been said, a new Islam is needed

## 2. Rethinking Islam in Modern Times

In these new times, new paradigms and approaches are, of course, entailed. Things have changed; a practice can seem to be good for some time, but as time passes, people can realize that it becomes outdated; this is how life functions. The patriarchal burden put upon women in the past can no longer prosper nowadays; this is what Solomon ANDRIA calls a *change of paradigms* in his excellent book *Initiatives Théologiques en Afrique* when he says: « y a-t-il un retour au Moyen Âge où le religieux était au centre de la vie et dominait tous les domaines de l'existence ? Les Temps modernes inaugurés au XVIIe siècle avec la Renaissance européenne sont-ils révolus? La raison cartésienne comme outil décisif de la vie moderne cède-t-elle le pas à l'émotion africaine, pour emprunter les termes de la fameuse citation de Léopold Sédar Senghor? Il y a dans tous les cas un changement de paradigme. Le monde entre dans une nouvelle ère. La société africaine est de plein pied dans la mondialisation. ....elle la subisse. Son économie, sa vie sociale et surtout sa vie religieuse en feront les frais » S.Andria (2016 :10)

"Is Are there a return to the middle Ages when religion was at the center of life and dominated all areas of existence? Are modern times inaugurated, in the 16th century with the European Renaissance over? Does Cartesian reason as a decisive tool of

modern life give way not to African emotion, to borrow the terms of the famous quote by Léopold Sédar Senghor? There is in all cases a change of paradigm. The world is entering into a new era. African society is fully in the process of globalization. It has no choice. It shares with the whole world the benefits and misdeeds of this great movement. But the misdeeds will be more numerous and destructive if it does not deal with it calmly and with a cool head. The nature's law requires that if Africa does not act in globalization as a true partner, it endures it. Its economy, its social life and above all his religious life will pay the price."<sup>7</sup> This is an absolute truth, people have got to change, and we now live in a globalized world with a kind of globalized and universal culture and tradition. The place of women and their perception of Islam must be considered.

### **2.1 Islam, place, time and Liberty**

This 21<sup>st</sup> century has coincided with several world hot issues from economy, movement and religion. The Canadian professor Marshall McLuhan in his book *The Medium is a Message* talks about the effects and consequences of globalization, media, communication and technology. Today, many issues have flustered human life. The issue of religion is not left behind. Islam is no longer the exclusive belonging of Middle Eastern people, it has gone beyond boundaries and has become a property of the world. Place and time play a crucial role in Islam. Aboulela herself is a clear example of that Western interpretation of religion that she will embrace once she is far from home. In all of her fiction, people can easily understand her position. In the *Bird Summons*, all the women have migrated to England and because of their new environment, their reading of Islam becomes different. This begins of course, with their idol Evelyn Cobbold, who travelled to Mecca and, by the way, dwarfed distance and hewed that large bridge that separated the

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<sup>7</sup> My translation

West and the East. Her pilgrimage epitomizes a phenomenon that will soon pave the way for people. When travelling to the holy city of Islam, she was opening perspectives by showing that no matter the place, unity and consideration is possible. The huge task is undertaken by a woman to show that religion cannot be the absolute definition of one single people. Its message transcends time and space, and this needs to be taken and understood as such. About Evelyn it is said in the novel that: "the first British woman to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca, to educate themselves about the history of Islam in Britain, to integrate better by following the example of those who were of this soil and of their faith, those for whom this island was an inherited rather than adopted home." (*ibid.*, p.6)

Space often represents a great challenge, allowing some to truly define themselves but others to hide because of prejudices. The example of Natasha in *The Kindness of Enemies* is striking. She comes from a mixed marriage between a Russian mother and a Sudanese father. Their relationship will soon meet problems because of the unfortunate overlap of the duality between identity and space. When she came to Britain she is first confronted with the issue of religion through her name so much so that she was obliged to change it

Many Muslims in Britain wished that no one knew they were Muslim. They would change their names if they could and dissolve into the mainstream, for it was not enough for them to openly condemn 9/11 and 7/7, not enough to walk against the wall, to raise a glass of champagne, to eat in the light of Ramadan and never step into a mosque or say the shahada or touch the Qur'an. L. Aboulela(2021:126)

This situation is a boring one because people will always need to try to justify who they are and what they are here for. Because of one situation, all people are judged and considered the same. Space has something to do with migration. Through the change of environment, people come to see things otherwise. Almost all of

Aboulela's characters have embraced Islam in the West, and their reading will be different. There will be a mixture of orthodoxy and modernity, and this overlap creates a kind of hybrid Islam that takes into account parameters that were previously neglected. This is, of course, the kind of religion that needs to be promoted. Religions also need to change paradigms; there is an evolution of people and then of the message they deliver.

Aboulela's fabled novels yielded her particular attention and recognition throughout the world. Through her strong intellectual career and particular background, she has managed to bring together East and West. Two different parts of the world which have shared a painful past that has swayed their present relationship. In doing so, she goes beyond this mere issue of geographical setting, but she is in fact, trying to bring Islam and the West together, two different ideologies that have never been brought together. Her female protagonists, both in *The Translator* and *Minaret*, live in foreign countries. The issue of identity will define her novels. In *Minaret*, the heroine Najwa lives overseas, and her coming to England was not at random. Before the political upheavals, they were accustomed to travelling to Europe, but only this time, she is abroad as a political refugee, as a displaced person. The description of time and space in the very first lines of the novel shows how different everything is. From the time when one changes place, even in the same country, it is always a challenge to be accepted, above all if there is a difference of colour and language

I've come down in the world. I've slid to a place where the ceiling is low and there isn't much room to move. Most of the time I'm used to it. Most of the time I'm good. I accept my sentence and do not brood or look back. ... of birth, there is always disappointment. Now it is at its best, now it is poised like a mature woman whose beauty is no longer fresh but still surprisingly potent  
L.Aboulela (2021:32)

Her feelings are a mixture of happiness and sorrow, the way she describes the place: *a low ceiling, no enough to move*, all this may seem trivial, but in reality, it is not. This can be seen as a metaphorical element to show how life itself is a burden for her in her first days in England. She lived in liberty and did not know anything about religion or poverty. She was never looked at because of her accoutrement, but once here, she fears people to discover who she really is. And this, she takes it as a curse, a sentence. She is bewildered by the new life; however, at the same time, she has a little feeling of gratitude, and she admires the environment outside. She needs to go out of her room, the symbol of jail and individuality and go out to get in touch with people. Life is meaningful only if it is fully lived with people around, no matter what happens. In *Bird Summons*, women are fortunately free to choose; what they face here could not have been accepted elsewhere, and this shows as well how important it is to move. Since people live in a globalized world, religion as well needs to be globalized. People share the same beliefs from different places, and Islam becomes then a world property, an ocean of orientations that everyone can fetch from. This aspect brings a liberal sense of interpretation and women's engagement in religious matters. In redefining these principles, some other norms are set, and women have proposed another definition of the concept of *haram*.

## **2.2 *Haram, Halal and Social Organisation***

*Bird Summons* describes the lives of three brave women who, because of their religious convictions, will undertake a journey of their own. But what we can see is that they are very different from the type of Arabic women in the past. Here, they can drive, they can teach, and almost all of them are living with a certain mental and moral revolution. They are Muslim feminists, and they have decided to live their lives according to their principles and understanding of the world. All of them have problems, they all suffer, but they do not abdicate. Having a husband in the Muslim



context was a burden, and even in the traditional African context in general. What they are doing here is not in connivance with their religious and cultural beliefs. If we take the example of their game, we can realize that all of them have a big problem. This was the fear of some African feminists who would say that Western feminism is also gender biased and promotes homosexuality. They shatter the sacred links of the family by refusing marriage, in so doing; they sever the laws of society. In their kind of game, when each one of them had to choose a sin they would make if they were given the chance, this would be their respective answers:

"Salma said, 'Imagine a hypothetical situation in which you are allowed to commit one sin and get away with it. Only one major sin. It would be wiped clean straight afterwards and would never count against you in this life or the next. What would you do?'

Kill Murtada, thought Moni. No, kill myself. No, kill both Adam and myself. Her eyes filled with tears. She had been counselled once and was told that these fantasies of self-harm were signals that she was exhausted, highly stressed, on the verge of not coping..... Salma laughed. She could imagine Iman on the cover of a magazine. Long hair cascading down to her hips. But she was too beautiful to be a model. Whatever piece of clothing she was modelling would be overshadowed by herself. But then maybe not. ....'. 'Moni?' 'You're too optimistic, Salma,' Moni said. 'What if the sin doesn't get wiped away, instead it manifests itself physically and we are stuck with it?' (*op. cit.*, p.26)

Something is astonishing here in this game. The first thing is the idea of the game itself. It is about telling the sins they would commit if they were allowed to, without any consequence. The word they use is something *Haram*<sup>8</sup>; this word, in the Islamic jurisprudence, means any act that is forbidden by God and one of

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<sup>8</sup> *Haram* refers to any act that is forbidden by Allah. It can include various acts or behaviours such as alcohol, murder, gambling; these are actions that lead to moral harm

the five Islamic commandments. It is opposed to the word *Halal*<sup>9</sup>. Well, the fact of deciding to choose one thing that is *haram* is, first of all against any religion, it even challenges religion. This means that these three women do not care much about true Islamic principles; for them, religion is just a means of maintaining them under the domination of men. Their answers as well will be very strange because Moni, the first who took the floor, says; she would kill her husband Murtada and kill herself. This is the same idea found in *Purple Hibiscus*, where the death of the husband is in fact the beginning of true life, liberty and genuine freedom. Killing in Islam and even in Christianity is one of the biggest sins a human being can commit. However, these women do not consider it as such, because they think that what they go through every day is similar to death and the example of Moni herself can state that. Aboulela is not the only Arabic author who has dealt with such an issue. We can still remember the fantastic novel from Al SAADAWI, *Women at Point Zero*, the very controversial character of Firdaus legitimates murder because, for her, all men deserve to be killed because of the different bad experiences she had in her life and until her death, hitherto, she is not satisfied with men that is why she says :

"I am a killer, but I've committed no crime. Like you, I kill only criminals.' ...

'My mother was not a criminal. No woman can be a criminal. To be a criminal one must be a man.' 'Now look here, what is this that you are saying?' 'I am saying that you are criminals, all of you: the fathers, the uncles, the husbands, the pimps, .' ..... I want nothing. I hope for nothing. I fear nothing. Therefore I am free. For during life it is our wants, our hopes, our fears that enslave us. The freedom I enjoy fills them with anger. They would like to discover that there is after all something which I desire, or fear, or hope for. Then they know they can enslave me once more. Some

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<sup>9</sup> *Halal* is the opposite of *haram* and refers to the acts that are permissible in Islam

time ago one of them came to me and said:"N. Al Saadawi(1983:100)

Even in front of death, Firdaus says that she has only killed criminals; for her, all men are criminals, and their ultimate fate is without any doubt death. She embodies what frightens men, and that is why she says: her life will be their death, and her death will be her life. But since she is a woman and they are men, she will die but, at least, she is very proud of the act she did, because so far, women did not dare to do so and, she has paved the way for those who eventually, would dream of doing the same thing. In the same wavelength, she keeps on saying:

"Anyone who saw me spitting at the picture might think that I knew the man whose face I was spitting at personally. But in fact, I did not know him. For after all, I'm only a lone woman. is, she cannot get to know all men. But with each of the men I ever knew... . That is why they are afraid and in a hurry to execute me. They do not fear my knife. It is my truth which frightens them. This fearful truth gives me great strength. It protects me 102 from fearing death, or life, or hunger, or nakedness, or destruction. It is this fearful truth which prevents me from fearing the brutality of rulers and policemen. N. Al Saadawi (*op. cit.*, p.102.)

Firdaus has reached a level in her life where fear no longer exists, for her and in that stage, she strongly believes that she has just got the very liberty. Unfortunately, she will not live long enough to benefit from her courage and decision. So death here cannot be a crime if men are the victims. I think this is the sort of feminism that people should avoid endorsing. In Africa, yes, women have lived in very difficult conditions but today, what we need is to be united and try to readapt our social norms to the realities of the world.

As for Salma and Iman, the sins they would commit are between drinking alcohol and staying naked. Alcohol is one of the things in Islam that are *haram*; those who take it are considered as non-believers. So how can they think about drinking that? In some

African countries, it is common to see men drinking alcohol but it will be an abomination to see women drinking, above all in an Islamic country. What makes the exception here is that they all are out of their countries, so this is one of the reasons why many critics think of Aboulela's fiction as not *halal* because not only is it written in the West which is a *haram* country but sometimes issues dealt with do not correspond to the teaching of Islam. So the redefinition of Islam has not only brought a new reading and interpretation of the Quran, but it has also brought about a new way of considering recommendations and prohibitions. The very meaning of *Haram* has been put into question so that it does not forcibly become what it was. A new Islam is then proposed by these women, an Islam that gives them disenthralment and relief.

## Conclusion

The issue of religion has always brought controversy throughout time. It is a diaphanous topic because of its scope and all the stakeholders that share its principles. We have seen in the first part of this paper how religious conventions and norms slant people's organization favoring then women to the detriment of women. This issue of misinterpretation comes as landmark to awake women so that they give their own interpretation, understand of Islam and the impact they have on social matters. The second part deals with the reconsideration of Islam in modern times. Time and space have always contributed to the understanding and interpretation of the world. Distances are dwarfed and hewed so that a same song be sung everywhere. In doing so, new horizons are proposed where some notions like *haram* are redefined. As compared to gender, religion as well is a social construction. Islam, for example, came for a specific people, in a specific society with a specific culture and tradition at a specific time. With time, people have misunderstood things and so misinterpreted the sacred texts as far as the issue of

women is concerned. The time has come now for women to stand up to hype or even overhype a new way of reading and interpreting Islam. In the *Bird Summons*, Aboulela strives to go over the lives of three women who embark on a journey not only for self-discovery but for self-realization. Salma, one of the main protagonists, organizes this trip to the Scottish highlands to visit the grave of Evelyn Cobbold, the first United Kingdom woman to make Hajj. This very journey turned out to be more than a trip; it became a pilgrimage to follow the examples of their likes who were in the same place with the same desire. On behalf of faith, this journey is undertaken without the blessing or agreement of men. In doing so Aboulela is exhilarating a passion and mission; that of women's liberation, autonomy and liberty as far as religion is concerned. In this novel, Aboulela scoured topics to unveil to irreverent position of men hectoring their so-called understanding of Islam, reeling off their interpretation she thinks is only bias. She finally proposes a kind of Islam, more liberal that will favour women and in which they can have their say. Seeing through the angle of feminism, she is shaping new ways in which women have liberty and read their religion the way they like. In doing so, their position and consideration of some principles like the notion of *haram* are taking another definition. These women have tried to reinvent and redefine Islam by giving their one way of interpreting the world. Things have changed and religion needs to adapt to people's life. This will help people to see the importance of reading religion through the new requirements of our time to meet the needs of people. However, African moral values should be taken into account. Because of the inclination of some female writers, and their negligence, these women have unfortunately no longer been able to take Africa as a model to forge a new path with traditional values. Culture is the soul and expression of a people; it determines how societies function, that's why if it is disowned, the results are terrible. If it is true that we live in an unipolar world, it is equally essential that each

people makes their way according to their tradition, culture and history but it is what Aboulela has missed to take into account. One question can still be asked: to what extent shall people go on behalf of liberty? The importance of such a study is also to allow people to see that religion is meant to organize and orient people.

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