

The Immature Masculinity in the Novels of Cihan Aktaş and Leila Aboulela*

Mahbube Yavaş Bulut**

Abstract

Narrating and problematizing “masculinity” or “man” through the eyes of the female writer has gained importance. Especially in today’s Muslim fiction, women’s experience of recounting and questioning men draws attention. Accordingly, in this article, I have examined how the male characters in the latest novels of British Muslim female writer Leila Aboulela of Sudanese origin and Turkish Muslim female writer Cihan Aktaş are reconstructed through the eyes of a female writer. In this context, the following works *Şirin’in Düğünü* (Şirin’s wedding) and *Seni Dinleyen Biri* (Someone listening to you) by Cihan Aktaş and *Minaret* and *The Translator* by Leila Aboulela have been analysed focusing on the male protagonists in terms of the Western modernity paradigm and the irrationality of male characters as a repetitive pattern in contemporary Muslim women writing. In this sense, it is possible to discuss the representation of masculinity in contemporary Muslim fiction as well as understand the everyday life struggles of contemporary Muslim women.

Key Words: Islam, masculinity, women’s writing, Cihan Aktaş, Leila Aboulela.

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** Istanbul Şehir University, Cultural Studies Master’s Degree Graduate.

mahbube_yavas@live.nl ORCID: 0000-0003-2852-3375

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Cihan Aktaş ve Leila Aboulela'nın Romanlarında Gelişmemiş Erkeklik

Öz

Kadın yazarın gözünden “erkekliğin” ya da “erkeğin” anlatılması ve sorunsallaştırılması önem kazanmıştır. Özellikle bugünün Müslüman edebiyatında kadının erkeği anlatma ve sorgulama deneyimi dikkat çekicidir. Dolayısıyla, bu makalede, Sudan asıllı İngiliz Müslüman kadın yazar Leila Aboulela'nın ve Türk Müslüman kadın yazar Cihan Aktaş'ın son romanları üzerinden “erkek karakterlerin” nasıl temsil edildiğini ele aldım. Bu bağlamda, Cihan Aktaş'ın *Şirin'in Düşünü* ve *Seni Dinleyen Biri*; Leila Aboulela'nın *Minaret* (Minare) ve *The Translator* (Çevirmen) eserlerini erkek kahramanların Batı modernliği paradigması ve günümüz Müslüman kadın edebiyatında tekrarlayan bir model olarak erkek karakterlerin mantıksızlığı üzerinden inceledim. Bu anlamda erkekliğin çağdaş Müslüman edebiyatında temsilini tartışmak ve günümüz Müslüman kadınların gündelik yaşam mücadelelerini anlamak mümkündür.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İslam, erkeklik, kadın edebiyatı, Cihan Aktaş, Leila Aboulela.

Introduction

This article aims to compare and discuss the repetitive patterns of the representation of male characters in the works of two contemporary Muslim women writers namely, Cihan Aktaş and Leila Aboulela. To introduce briefly¹, Cihan Aktaş is known for her numerous short storybooks and novels but also her research and thesis books on gender studies in Turkey. Her stories and novels are written in Turkish and mainly set in Turkey. There are rich portrayals of various Muslim women speaking about their everyday life struggles trying to find their individual voice despite the oppression of collective discourses in her works. Scholars such as Kenan Çayır, Ahmet Sait Akçay, Elifhan Köse and Zehra Yılmaz examining contemporary Muslim fiction nowadays, often refer to Cihan Aktaş in their stud-

¹ For more detailed information about the authors: Bulut, M. Y. (2019). Contemporary Muslim Characters in Cihan Aktaş and Leila Aboulela, (Master Dissertation), İstanbul Şehir University College of Humanities and Social Sciences.

ies as she has witnessed the change from “Hidayet Romanları” (salvation novels) to self-reflexive novels in the ’80s and ’90s. Accordingly, Cihan Aktaş is considered a leading Muslim female author in Turkish literature reconstructing self-reflexive and self-critical Muslim fiction nowadays. On the other hand, Leila Aboulela is a British Muslim female writer from Sudanese origin writing in English and publishing her works in Britain. The author resides currently in Aberdeen and Dubai. The author has received positive criticism for questioning multi-identities, immigration and Muslim cultures in Britain and their everyday life problems in her works. Her stories and novels are remarkable as these characters try to reason with Islam in contemporary Europe, where minorities are far more challenged since post 9/11.

Significantly, these authors writing in different countries and languages have a lot in common and are productive writers providing the chance to examine numerous samples of Muslim characters in terms of Muslim women speaking about their everyday life problems, Muslim female characters problematizing masculine domination and their individual experience with Islam instead of a collective experience. However, the reconstruction of Muslim female characters and problematizing the domination of masculine power might have led to the loss of masculinity regarding the common portrayal of male characters as immature, irrational and irresponsible in the works of both authors. This issue will be further examined focusing on the male characters Faruk in *Şirin’in Düğünü* (2016) (Şirin’s wedding) and Halil from *Seni Dinleyen Biri* (2007) (Someone listening to you) by Cihan Aktaş, and Anwar from *Minaret* (2005) and Rae from *The Translator* (2000) by Leila Aboulela.

To begin with, the term “Muslim fiction” is explained by Karine Ancellin in “Hybrid Identities of Characters in Muslim women fiction post 9-11” as,

In the post-9/11 era, the notion of a ‘Muslim’ stigma becomes increasingly significant in literature. The attacks on the New York twin towers aroused inescapable questions, sharpening Muslim writers’ narratives and altering the ‘name value’ of the author. Debates about Islam erupted in the public sphere. Muslim names were gaining a sort of familiar

resonance. They had become less 'foreign' and interested more readers. Moreover, a generation of Western-educated Muslim immigrants' children were coming of age and, regardless of the 'Muslim' issue, they were choosing literature as a medium through which to express their artistic creativity. As a consequence of all this, the amount of Muslim-related fiction soared after 9/11 both by non-Muslims and by writers with a Muslim ancestry or a Muslim affiliation (Ancellin, 2009).

It can be understood that the term "Muslim Fiction" became evident and popular after 9/11 since Muslims in the West felt required to explain and defend themselves through literature. Leila Aboulela, in her column, called "Why must Britain's young Muslims live with this unjust suspicion?" refers to this topic on British Islamophobia with the following words,

Muslims are required to be on alert, distancing themselves from extremism, apologising for the latest atrocity, explaining, defending, dodging, avoiding confrontations or even discussions. Before even being exposed to radicalisation, young Muslims are talked down to and told off. They are shoved under the microscope. Whatever the news item, whatever the issue, be it cultural practice or immigration rules, regardless of how religious they are or how much they practise, by simply being Muslim the youth are made to feel that they are on the wrong side (Aboulela, July 2015).

Related to the above, the author partakes also in the book *The Things I Would Tell You –British Muslim Women Write* edited by Sabrina Mahfouz, with twenty-two British Muslim women writers; Fadia Faqir, Amina Jama, Chimene Suleyman, Aliyah Hasinah Holder, Kamila Shamsie, Imtiaz Dharker, Triska Hamid, Nafeesa Hamid, Ahdaf Soueif, Seema Begum, Leila Aboulela, Shazea Quraishi, Shaista Aziz, Miss L, Aisha Mirza, Hibaq Osman, Azra Tabassum, Selma Dabbagh, Asma Elbadawi, Samira Shackle, Sabrina Mahfouz and Hanan al-Shaykh in order to show the full range and richness of British Muslims in Britain and to challenge the negative portrayal of Muslim women after 9/11 in the West through their writings (Mahfouz, 2017, p.10). Sabrina Mahfouz states that these Muslim writings can defeat the negative stereotypes, positive representation can empower greatly and overpower the dominant narratives spreading

misrepresentation disempowering Muslims (Mahfouz, 2017, p.12). Leila Aboulela's participation in writing back to the dominant narratives and defining herself as a British Muslim is remarkable as the author often refers to the unfair statements and regulations by the British authorities², the hypocrisy in academia when it comes to Islam, how easy people can be labelled as terrorists in her works³.

Furthermore, in order to understand the significance of women writing and masculine domination, it is necessary to know how male-centred language functions linguistically. Helen Cixous in her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" referring to Derrida's "logocentric" (western dominance) and "phallus centric" (male dominance) concepts in language argues that language does not belong only to the West or to men and advocates women to find their own language (Cixous et al., 1976). Later on, Jacques Derrida combines these concepts as "phallogocentrism," accepting that Male-dominated texts highly influence Western culture (Moran, 1994). In other words, Cixous and Derrida opposed to the binaries in the "phallogocentric" language since the first binary concept oppresses the latter. These dominating binaries are men/women, west/east/liberal/conservative. Since the first binary oppresses the second, women have subconsciously defined themselves also as inferior to men living in patriarchal societies and using male-dominated language. Thereupon, Helen Cixous deconstructs these binaries by showing the ugliness of previous male-centered texts enslaving women and seeing her as inferior, and introduces the concept of "Écriture Féminine" motivating women to find her own mode of feminine expression and to write herself (886).

To illustrate further, the significance of women writing women can be seen in Cihan Aktaş' short story "Kusursuz Piknik" (The

² Aboulela, L. (2015, July 27). Why must Britain's young Muslims live with this unjust suspicion? | Leila Aboulela. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jul/27/britain-young-muslims-suspicion>.

³ Aboulela, L. (2017). *The kindness of enemies*. New York: Grove Press. (in *The Kindness of Enemies* Leila Aboulela chases the possible errors of the anti-terror legislation in Britain in order to show the disruptions and failures of these regulations.

Flawless Picnic) (Aktaş, 2009) and this work could be considered as an idiom like Helen Cixous “last laugh” since it could be used as an expression to define “the doom of men expecting perfectness from women and are left helpless as a consequence” (Aslan, 2015 pg.100). Prof. Bahtiyar Aslan analyzing the story puts forth that women were regarded as “flawed” throughout history compared to the “perfect men”, however, today the modern woman is forced to be “flawless” and is pressurized by the male-dominated discourses (Aslan, 2015 pg.101). Moreover, the force to have “a perfect picnic” or “a perfect woman” is discussed and criticized by Cihan Aktaş because idealizing women oppress women even more as women feel insufficient and get tired of showing the best of themselves.

As a matter of course, current theorists on Muslim fiction in Turkey and specifically on Muslim women’s literature discuss that since the 90’s; the form of the Islamic novel has changed from a collective narration to a subjective narrative. Kenan Çayır explains this alteration in shape and pattern in his work *Islamic Literature in Contemporary Turkey from Epic to Novel* with the following words,

Western centric Kemalist conception of civilization and performed a transgression of secular boundaries-boundaries that equated “civilization” with the “West”-by Islamic subjects. These subjects, however, were collective subjects speaking in a language of “we” that was oriented towards group ideals promoted by the literary and intellectual narratives of Islamism. New socialization patterns, the acquisition of new professions, the attendance and transformation of urban spaces, and alternative practices of Islamic precepts in daily life resulted in new subject formations in the 1990s (Çayır, 2015, p.144).

Thus, the contemporary Muslim writings show novelties and new patterns differentiating themselves from the previous narratives using subjective voices instead of a collective voice. According to Ahmet Sait Akçay in his book *Bellekteki Huriler*, contemporary women writers criticize the salvation novels from the ’80s since women were shown inferior and were depicted as poisoning the norms and values of the society and the male characters discipline these flirty girls (Akçay, 2006, p.11). Consequently, the change from salvation novels

to self-critical books in the '90s⁴ gave birth to new patterns in Muslim women's writings today problematizing collective understanding of Islam, patriarchal oppression and shedding light on everyday life struggles of Muslim women.

Loss of Masculinity and the Modernity Paradigm

According to Elifhan Köse in *Sessizliği Söylemek*, there is a search for the loss of masculinity in contemporary Muslim women writings (Köse, 2014, p.101). Köse discusses in her chapter "Dindar Edebiyatta Umutsuz Arayış: Kaybolan Erkeklik", (the hopeless search in Muslim literature, the loss of masculinity) the concept of masculinity in salvation novels from the 60's to the 90's (Hidayet romanları) (Köse, 2014, p.104) and how this resemblance differed in post 2000's contemporary Muslim women writings. To be more explanatory, the salvation novels (Hidayet romanları) (Çayır, 2016, p.155) are opposed by Cihan Aktaş due to the unrealistic and far too idealistic narratives preventing Muslim authors and readers from problematizing current, actual and everyday life struggles of Muslims (Akçay, 2012, p.23). In addition, the characters in these novels were flawless or stereotypical (ideal heroes or fallen angels), there was a collective oppressing voice (We) instead of individual experiences (I) dominating the plot, and the narration was decorated with suppressive clichés. Owing to this, Ahmet Sait Akçay claims that these novels were dominated by patriarchal pleasures and oriental depictions of women and argues that they could be seen as one of the reasons for Muslims turning to worldly pleasures instead of carrying religious concerns today (Akçay, 2012, p.65). Consequently, these novels restricted Muslim women participation in public spaces and promoted to stay home and related to this Cihan Aktaş tells in an interview with Suzan Nur Başarslan that she has always admired Halide Edip's

⁴ More information about the change in Muslim fiction from the 60's to the 90's popular self-critical novels can be found also in Çimen Günay-Erkol and Uğur Çalışkan's paper: Günay Erkol, Çimen, & Uğur Çalışkan. "1960'lardan 28 Şubat'a Cemaati Romanlarla İcat Etmek: Siyasal İslamın Popüler Tezahürleri." *Moment Dergi* [Çevrimiçi], 3.1 (2016): n. pag. Web. 17 Feb. 2021

Kaya and Rabia character more than Şule Yüksel's Feyza character because Aktaş prefers Kaya who transforms public sphere according to her ideals rather than Feyza in salvation novels idealizing the return to home (Başarslan, 2012). From this sample and many other expressions of the author, it can be stated that Cihan Aktaş prefers to write against the marginalized and alienated Muslim female characters in salvation novels reconstructing simple, casual, realistic, empowered Muslim female characters.

Accordingly, in Cihan Aktaş' latest novel *Şirin'in Düğünü* (Şirin's wedding) (2016), Faruk (the male protagonist) represents the fragmented male character having troubles with the modernity paradigm in contemporary Muslim fiction. In previous salvation novels, the experience of Muslim women with modernism clashing with the ideals of Islam was a common pattern and sin was more related to women while male characters were the saviours of this sin leading the female characters to the right path; however, the male experience with modernism and sinning was rare (Ahmet Sait Akçay, p.11). Elifhan Köse explains that Muslim women writers today are aware of problems stemming from a false notion of Western modernity clashing with the ideals of Islam and as a result; they believed that it was time to question Muslim male characters on this issue as well. Köse refers to Fatma Barbarosoğlu, also a well-known Muslim female writer in Turkey, who realized in contemporary Muslim female writings that men were depicted as incapable of coping with the paradigms of modernism while it was easier for the women to adapt (Köse, 2014, p.103). Thus, through Faruk it is possible to see that the male characters are in need of saving while female characters are often the saviours. To illustrate further, Faruk is the son of a rich and powerful company owner but his father refuses to assign him the executive powers of the company since he was unable to finish his studies and lacks the strength and capability of being responsible in his relationships. He is the lover and future husband of the main female character Şirin and reflects the new generation upper-class Modern Muslim man, alienated and disconnected from his Islamic norms and values. Moreover, the author constructs a male character coming from a conservative Muslim background, however, his views about women with a headscarf is negative due to his false notions on

being modern, and he believes that scarfed women should work and live somewhere but not in his company, far from his life and for this reason; he dislikes Şirin's friendship with Esmâ as he thinks these "scarfed girls" always create problems (Aktaş, 2016, p.491). Cihan Aktaş clearly criticizes and shows the contradictory mind-set of male characters trying to be "modern" or "secular" related to the political history of Turkey but ignoring the ideals of Islam⁵ ⁶. Related to this, this male character does not want his wife Şirin to cover her hair with a scarf as he thinks other people will think he forced her into this (Aktaş, 2016, p.532) and makes up unsupported stories about scarfed girls and besmirches Esmâ saying that she wears a scarf because she is ugly and wants to hide her prominent chin (Aktaş, 2016, p.561). Cihan Aktaş clearly mocks Faruk's attitudes and behaviours showing the contradictions and the paradox to be "modern". As a result, the author deconstructs through Faruk the previous heroic portrayals of Muslim men leading the "flirty women" to Islam (in previous salvation novels as mentioned above) and instead constructs a flirty male character depending on the guidance of Şirin, the female character.

To illustrate further, in *Seni Dinleyen Biri* (2007) (Someone Listening to You), Halil is incapable of coping with the paradigms of modernism in all ways, and this incapability makes him jump from one ideology to the other, from one city to the other and from one woman to the other. Halil might be the most confused male character in Cihan Aktaş' works. Ayşe Saraçgil examining the representation of men in Turkish fiction in her book *Bukalemun Erkek* (Cha-

⁵ Umüt Azak: "Beyond the Headscarf: Secularism and Freedom of Religion in Turkey": In other words, women, veiled or unveiled, are challenged by the same patriarchal hegemony, denying them treatment as equal individuals in any space, conservative/ Islamic or secular. Hence the critique of patriarchal social norms from within Islamic groups by women activists and writers such as Fatma Barbarosoğlu, Cihan Aktaş, and Sibel Erarslan –often referred to as "Islamic feminists"– is crucial for problematizing gender relations which restrict women's capacities in both Islamic and secular environments (p.98).

⁶ Yeşim Arat in "Women's Challenge to citizenship in Turkey" However, first the parameters within which Islam was circumscribed had to be enlarged. Islamist women, those who used Islam as an explicit political ideology to define themselves, had to wage a fight to have themselves accepted publicly rather than merely privately. The most visible and politically critical battle was fought in defence of women's right to cover their heads in any public space, as they claimed Islam dictates (p.111).

meleon Man) points to the modernity paradigm of Muslim men in Turkish fiction. Saraçgil states that during the modernization period coming with urbanisation, Muslim women started to redefine their Muslim identity, used their veils to participate actively and comfortably in public spaces, and merged their values benefitting from modernism. On the other hand, Muslim men failed to integrate and redefine their Muslim identity ignoring the changes coming with urban life. Since men refused to re-identify their modern Muslim identities, they continued seeing women as objects (Saraçgil 2005, 405). Similar to this, Halil objectifies women in his life as he fails to adapt to city life with his Muslim identity. At first, this male character disavows city life and urbanization because he follows a spiritual leader called “the Belgian Sufi” and subsequently he moves to Siirt to live the ideal, simple and uncorrupted life. To his surprise, this spiritual leader influencing many like Halil had returned to city life himself, and after hearing the rumours of this return, Halil cannot accept and admit that this ideology was a failure (Aktaş, 2007, p.341). Soon, the male character being incapable of holding onto life without modernism, technology, and science because he missed the advantages of technology and education, returns abruptly to Istanbul leaving his wife behind to pick up his studies and contacts his ex-lover Meral (Aktaş, 2007, p.365). In a little while, he moves abruptly to Urfa and starts a relationship with a singer working for the same project leaving both women (his wife and love) uninformed behind in Istanbul (Aktaş, 2007, p.422). The author criticizes harshly through Halil how fragmented the mind of Muslim men are today leading to unrest and distrust of people around them as they are unable to integrate in today’s modern world with their Muslim identity and fail take responsibility in their relationship with women.

The estrangement of Muslims in the West, Muslim women in particular, has a long history⁷; however, problematizing the mar-

⁷ Lila Abu-Lughod explains that it was called “gendered Orientalism.” Many defined after women through Edward Said’s Orientalist concept. Abu Lughod refers to sample works of: Dohra Ahmad, “Not Yet beyond the Veil: Muslim Women in American Popular Literature,” *Social Text* 27, no. 99 (2009): 105; Rana Kabbani, *Europe’s Myths of Orient* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986); and Meyda Yeğenoğlu, *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

ginalization of Muslim women theoretically started with Edward Said's *Orientalism*, in this case; the West seeing Muslim women as an "Orientalized concept" to actualize colonization (Said, 2003). Referring to Said's *Orientalism*, Professor Lila Abu-Lughod, who worked at least 30 years with Arab women in the Middle East, asked: "Do Muslim Women Need Saving?" (Abu-Lughod, 2015). Initially, Abu-Lughod claims that there has been "a moral crusade" in the West "to save" the "oppressed Muslim women", however, her thirty years of experience showed her the opposite; Muslim women are surprised that the Westerners believe Islam oppresses Muslim women. Moreover, the hypocrisy of the Western experts neglecting problems related to women at home in Western countries and going instead to the Middle East to "save" Muslim women is heavily criticized in this work. Furthermore, Abu-Lughod describes how Islam is shown as a threatening culture by the West and points explicitly to feminists,

The media enthusiastically took up stories about the status and suppression of women. Feminists joined the cause. Popular memoirs by Muslim women who exposed the plights of their benighted sisters in Iran, Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia became best sellers in the West. Women's organizations headed off to Afghanistan alongside a battery of humanitarians and legal experts. Later, these groups set up shop in Iraq, a country in which, ironically, women had previously enjoyed the highest levels of education, labor force participation, and even political involvement in the Arab world (Abu Lughod, 2015, p.7).

Eventually, Abu-Lughod conceptualizes her work as "writing against culture"; deconstructing the culture misrepresenting Muslims and seeing them as the most "rest", as the opposite pole of the West (Abu-Lughod, 2015, p.6). Referring to the literary scholar Dohra Ahmad's concept (Ahmad, 2009), Abu-Lughod analyses texts and so-called studies depicting "Muslim women as abused" and calls it "pulp-nonfiction"⁸ since women are portrayed in these books as collective identities suffering from Islam or trying to escape. More-

⁸ In chapter 3 "The Fantastic World of "Pulp Nonfiction", Abu-Lughod refers to works showing Muslims as abused and trying to escape as "pulp-nonfiction": Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Asne Seierstad's *The Bookseller of Kabul*, Ayaan Hirsi Ali's *The Caged Virgin* and its sequels.

over, Abu-Lughod's contribution is not only showing how specific texts have prevented understanding and questioning "real" problems oppressing Muslim women (such as governmental, political or financial authorities in Egypt) but is also a self-criticism inviting scholars to study against the mainstream discourses suggesting experts to ask these women within instead of assuming on behalf of them.

Leila Aboulela in *Minaret* (2005) shows through Anwar (the male protagonist) the inferiority complex of immigrants trying to fit into the ideals of the Western "Modernism" and in return see their cultural and religious heritage as backwards. Anwar is a secular and leftist student and organizes demonstration in Sudan but when the coup in Sudan fails he is forced to flee to London and his ideas about the west turns into admiration in Britain (Aboulela, 2006, p.156). He is confused about his identity in Sudan (being a communist), the new identity in London (western or being seen as a nigger) and how he should treat his girl-friend Najwa since he hates her father due to political reasons (Aboulela, 2006, p.157). Aboulela shows Anwar as a clear-cut, not open to criticism male character who uses the term "modern" and "modernism" for his own interests (Aboulela, 2006, p.176). His lover Najwa has a modest nature and deep inside longs to find peace in Islam and to have a stable relationship but is afraid of Anwar's reaction (Aboulela, 2006, p.161) because Anwar despises Najwa telling her she is backward and that marriage is evil and not modern. Knowing very well that Najwa has a modest nature and needs stability after losing her family, Anwar does not propose to her or does not see his relationship with her as a serious relationship but demands her to be "modern" to make use of her (Aboulela, 2006, p.177). In this sense, Anwar's modernity paradox is related to his ethnic background as well as his Muslim heritage as he defines modernism as the opposite of religious and cultural values.

In *The Translator* (2000), the male protagonist Rae is British and not an immigrant, however, he also struggles with the Western modernity paradox. Rae is a successful academician and an expert in Middle Eastern studies, he has an interest in Islam, however, despite believing in God and that the Quran is a sacred text (Aboulela, 2010, p.93) he does not convert to Islam. His immaturity prevents him

from confessing to himself and others that he is a Muslim because this will make him lose his credibility and bring a new responsibility. It is “a modern thing” states Yasmin to Sammar (Aboulela, 2010, p.93) that academicians are interested in their fields but merely as an outsider. She tells Sammar that it would be a “professional suicide” for Rae to convert,

Because no one will take him seriously after that. What would he be? Another ex-hippy gone off to join some weird cult. Worse than a weird cult, the religion of terrorists and fanatics. That's how it would be seen. He's got enough critics as it is: those who think he is too liberal, those who would even accuse him of being a traitor just by telling the truth about another culture (Aboulela, 2010, p.22).

Rae knows a lot about Islam, maybe even more than many Muslims by birth; however, he never considered his spiritual nature and converting to Islam until meeting the female character Sammar. He can take this step only after Sammar who motivates him to find self-fulfilment in Islam and life in general. Being British and an expert on his field did not save Rae from the oppression of this so-called Western Modernity paradox about Islam and it took a lot of time and courage for Rae to confess his faith and love for Sammar.

Irrational Masculinity in Contemporary Muslim Fiction

Elifhan Köse examines the body and gender theory of traditional Islamic thought and states that in traditional Islamic thought, gender relations are given unwary and eclectic. Men and women are seen as the parts of the body inseparable from each other; however, men represent the mind while women represent the heart. This metaphor depicts men as the ratio of the body and women as the emotional or merciful part. Related to this, some of the Muslim women writers have not rejected this ideology, but they have embraced “difference” over the definition “equality” between the two sexes (Köse, 2014, p.87). The body-mind theory is another binary of masculine domination on women as “the other” functioning as male-centred

texts in literature and is deconstructed by both authors. While deconstructing this theory, both authors empowered their female protagonists but at the same time represent a common pattern in contemporary Muslim fiction wherein male characters are shown weak and emotional and are unable to control their feelings while female characters can control their feelings and act rationally.

Faruk (the male protagonist) in *Şirin'in Düğünü* (2016), (Şirin's wedding), follows only his desires and even escapes from reasoning. For instance, when they meet for the first time in Morocco, Faruk offers to drink wine, but Şirin refuses to consume alcohol as she prefers to be sober and rational while Faruk makes jokes about “not being drunk with a little bit of wine,” but he gets drunk at the end of the day (Aktaş, 2016, p.239). Furthermore, without thinking about the norms and values or the gossips in the media, Faruk invites Şirin to stay in the same hotel; however, Şirin refuses this offer and he blames her for “overthinking” and “calculating” everything like a “home girl” (Aktaş, 2016, p.246). When sober, Faruk realizes how mature Şirin treated his inconsistency and irrationality; he confesses that he acted emotional and left Şirin behind in Morocco uninformed and “made a mountain out of a molehill” but is sure that she will forgive his immaturity (Aktaş, 2016, p.266). This contemporary Muslim male character is not only irrational but also demands understanding for his behaviours. When Faruk blames Şirin for being scared to give in to love, Şirin replies that she does not have fears but “concerns” about his behaviour jumping from one woman to another and telling her he does not love those women (Aktaş, 2016, p.458). Faruk's depiction as “a spoiled brat” and being unable to control his feelings is clearly the opposite of the “ideal saviour hero” in previous salvation novels as mentioned before in Turkey where male characters were the ratio and saved the emotionally weak female characters.

Similarly, in *Seni Dinleyen Biri* (2007) (Someone Listening to You), for Halil (the male protagonist), the ideal woman is illiterate, plain, does not read much, talk much, knows much and thus can devote herself to her husband (Aktaş, 2007, p.311). This character not only uses his masculinity to oppress but also embraces the traditional body-mind theory to make life easier for himself. When his wife

Muhlise teaches him Islamic teachings and asks him to teach her how to read and to write in Turkish, Halil refuses because he does not want an independent wife (Aktaş, 2007, p.318). Halil is aware of his irresponsible and irrational behaviors because educated girls like Meral question his desires and choices; however, rural girls like Muhlise have no other choice than obeying their husbands. Moreover, Halil's irrationality is due to his quickly shifting so-called "philosophies" serving to solve his sexual desires through women. The female protagonist Meral is quite rational towards Halil's emotionality, and rejects his proposal to go with him to Urfa as he is married to Muhlise and needs to take responsibility of her and the baby. Halil always demands matters against Meral's principles and ratio while Meral can put her feelings aside and refuse these proposals (Aktaş, 2007, p.388). Halil confesses that Meral never made things easier for him, and she was always calculating and acting rationally instead of giving in to their love; however, Meral explains that she could not merely forget her duties as a Muslim and act according to her desires like him (Aktaş, 2007, p.411). Thus, the loss of masculinity pattern can be seen in Halil's confused mind-set and his inability to control his emotions in contrast with the female protagonist Meral's ability to control her feelings and to act rationally.

In *Minaret* (2005), Anwar's irrationality is mainly related to his inferiority complex as the "other" in Britain but also to the domination of political masculinity⁹. Politics is usually considered gender-neutral, however, since the 90's scholars in literature question political domination in favour of men. Anwar's mind is obsessed with the political past in Sudan as he had to leave Sudan after the failure of the coup and cannot confess that the current administration did not bring any improvement to the country. Moreover, the coup took the country backward instead of bringing forward but his hatred and biased views towards Najwa's father (the previous president) and the previous government did not change but turned into a hob-

⁹ Further information about political masculinity: "Starck, K., & Sauer, B. (2014). Political masculinities: Introduction. In K. Starck, & B. Sauer (Eds.), *A man's world? Political masculinities in literature and culture* (pp. 3–10). Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholar Publishing."

byhorse. It is possible to see Pierre Bourdieu's theory on symbolic violence¹⁰ through a language accepted by the dominant (Anwar) and the dominated (Najwa) in the novel. Anwar pushes to be always right in any discussion, although he can be wrong (Aboulela, 2015, p.104). Since Najwa's English is better, Anwar wants her to correct his grammar mistakes; however, he reacts like an immature kid who cannot accept criticism (Aboulela, 2015, p.107) and sneers at her out of nowhere,

'You and your family must be the Home Office's ideal asylum seekers - a flat in London, bank accounts filled with the money your father swindled.' Yes, we had the flat but the bank accounts were not full. He said, 'Don't try to kid me, I'm not stupid.' We quarreled. I hated quarrelling with him, hated that I would explain and explain yet he never believed me. And he had a knack of winning arguments even when I was in the right, even when I was telling the truth. 'Your father must have had another account then, offshore, somewhere else - Switzerland. It's ironic that you can't get hold of the money but believe me it's there (Aboulela, 2015, p.112).

Anwar's irrationality related to his inferiority complex and his political obsessions from the past prevents him to behave rationally and Najwa realizes that he will never change his negative attitude due to this obsession. Najwa is forced to take distance and to leave him because she knows he will never find a way to rationalize with her and he will keep oppressing her.

In *the Translator* (2000), Leila Aboulela's female character Sammar challenges a Western male academician, Rae, who is in the mid of all these discussions to overcome the pressure of the dominating West on becoming a Muslim. Sammar and Rae talk about Islamic issues, and although Rae is an expert about Middle Eastern history and Islam, it is Sammar, a Muslim woman who translates for Rae

¹⁰ "This extraordinarily ordinary social relation thus offers a privileged opportunity to grasp the logic of the domination exerted in the name of a symbolic principle known and recognized both by the dominant and by the dominated -a language (or a pronunciation), a lifestyle (or a way of thinking, speaking and acting) -and, more generally, a distinctive property, whether emblem or stigma, the symbolically most powerful of which is that perfectly arbitrary and non-predictive bodily property, skin colour" (Bourdieu, 2001, p.2).

and explains terminology to him (Aboulela, 2010, p.83). Through Sammar's translating Islam to Rae, Leila Aboulela deconstructs the negative and backward portrayal of Muslim women in Western pulp-fiction as mentioned before. Sammar translates and defines the "Shahada" (the testimony to convert to Islam) and teaches Rae the proper way it should be according to Islam (Aboulela, 2010, p.120). Sammar is not just a translator of language but she is translating the right path and religion to a Western man and this is new and against the stereotypical idea of Muslim women being oppressed by their husbands or Islam in the West. Leila Aboulela deconstructs these concepts through Sammar (female protagonist) translating words and religion for the male protagonist (Aboulela, 2010, p.41).

Conclusion

The novels of two Muslim female writers Cihan Aktaş and Leila Aboulela are studied and examined in order to discuss the representation of contemporary male characters in current Muslim fiction in Britain and Turkey. Both authors produce productively fiction on everyday life struggles of Muslims in Turkey and in Britain. Although they write in different regions and for different audiences, both writers create empowered female protagonists who problematize the contemporary male characters being unable to adapt their Muslim identities related to the modernity paradox and the inferiority complex of being "the other" in the West. While female protagonists have less problems with controlling their feelings and act logical, the male characters constantly follow their desires and fail to act rationally. The loss of masculinity in these works are based on writing back to the negative portrayals of female characters in previous pulp-fiction or salvation novels in Turkey, however, they are also the outcome of narrating the everyday life struggles of women in Turkey and Britain. For instance, building a family is critical for the female characters and their insecurity in finding a home or family due to the irresponsibility of male characters is a repeated pattern in the work of both authors. Thus, the loss of masculinity shows both criticism as well as an understanding of the struggles of women today trying to

reconstruct their Muslim identity in a post-modern world through literature. Since the female characters decide to live their faith despite any force or oppression and leave the immature male character behind (if needed), it cannot be said that there is a hidden agenda to portray the female characters as saviours but this pattern is common and could be discussed. To conclude, both authors show clearly that the Muslim female characters do not need to be saved by men or anyone but the male characters are definitely in need of being saved by overcoming their obstacles and adapting their Muslim identity in today's world.

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