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Sacred Spaces in Contemporary English Literature: Muslim Contributions

In the last two centuries, the representation of Islam and of Muslims in dominant western discourses—in the form of electronic and print media and scholarly and literary works—have often been less than appreciative; this religion and its adherents, both in popular culture and scholarly texts, have often been represented as backward and uncivilized, a point most emphatically argued by the late Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978). However, it can certainly be claimed that Islam and Muslims have never been as heavily demonized or marginalized in Western discourses as in the post 9/11 era, when they are being also represented as the sources of fear and threat.¹ A significant focus of western discourse on Muslims has been on Muslim women. Muslim women, especially veiled Muslim women, have always captured the imagination of people in the West, and these women's relationship with Islam has been the subject of much speculation in western mainstream and academic circles.² As many scholars agree, Muslim women in contemporary western discourses have often been depicted as either victims or escapees of Islam or, more recently, as the pawns of militant Islam.³ The popular genre of Muslim life narratives, which have proliferated in the years after the events of 9/11 too,⁴ have also reiterated the account of Islam as a backward and misogynist religion and Muslim women as powerless victims of Islam. These memoirs, with their claim to authenticity, have also helped to reify many Western stereotypes about Muslims and Islam in recent years.⁵

In the last decade, within such a context of representation of Islam and Muslim women in the West, a number of novels, written in English by women authors and published in western countries,⁶ tell a different story about Islam and about Muslim women. These novels foreground the spiritual dimension of Islam and insist on a deeply devotional relationship between the main female characters and the religion of Islam. This paper focuses on a selection of such novels, and argues that, due to their intense involvement with the Islamic sacred and spiritual, they create (regardless of a long tradition of Judeo-Christian representation) metaphoric sacred spaces almost unprecedented in English literature. I argue in this paper that the selected novels can

be described as metaphoric Muslim sacred spaces in the larger space of English literature because they represent Muslim spaces, moments and symbols in a range of different ways, and they validate the sacred, drawing attention to its significance in some people's lives rather than ironising it or regarding it sceptically. Throughout the paper, I demonstrate how particular novelistic techniques are employed by individual narratives for this validation of the sacred.

Importantly, these novels, through exploring the personal religious experiences of ordinary people and the portrayal of a number of unconventional sacred spaces and moments, problematize the view that the sacred is exclusively the province of the religious elite or that hallowed times and places are only those which are conventionally associated with the sacred. Moreover, I argue that although these novels specifically deal with the engagement of Muslim characters with the sacred through Islamic rituals and practices, and emphasise the importance to them of the form of the religious rituals and symbols, they also suggest that personal spiritual experiences of Muslims are not dissimilar to those of people of other creeds. Significantly, this depiction of the spiritual world of the Muslim characters is offered through the genre of the realist novel, a genre very familiar to western readers. Thus, these texts use a familiar vehicle to convey points about Islam that are different to those conveyed by more mainstream representations.

Literature interested in religious themes has, for several centuries, been part of the canon of literary traditions around the world, and English literature is no exception in this regard. A significant proportion of English literature, especially in past centuries, has been engaged with themes, subjects and symbols from Hellenistic religions, and from Judaism and Christianity. However, the religious tradition of English literature has been principally engaged with Christianity.⁷

The religion of Islam, a minority religion in English-speaking countries, has not historically enjoyed a similar position to Judaism and Christianity, the two other Abrahamic religions, in English literature, though it has been represented in European literary texts since medieval times. As Mohja Kahf (1999, p.4-5) argues, during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Western literature generally reflected the European perspective on Islam, which was characterized by viewing Islam as a blasphemous

creed or as a source of resentment because of the might of the 'Muslim world'⁸ at that time. However, orientalist discourse can explain most of the more recent representations of Islam and appearances of Islam in English literature, especially after the middle of the eighteenth century (Said 1978; Kahf 1999).

In postcolonial times, with English becoming the official language in some of the colonized countries, some Muslim writers from these countries began to give their own accounts of the Muslim world and produced literary works about Muslim issues and characters. Amin Malak, in his book *Muslim Narratives and the discourse of English* (2005), reports that Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi*, published in 1940, was a major novel of this kind (2005, p.19), though, he says that *Sultana's dream* (1905) by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, should be given the credit for being the first fictional contribution by a Muslim to English literature about Muslim characters and themes (2005, p.30). Many other Muslim writers of fiction have created works in English about Muslim communities, including Adib Khan, Mena Abdullah, M.G Vassanji, Farhana Sheikh, Ahdaf Sueif, Nurroddin Farah, and Abdulrazak Gurnah.⁹

In this paper, in order to explore the notion of the Muslim sacred and its representation in contemporary English literature, I will look briefly at four novels, *Sweetness in the belly* (2005) by Camilla Gibb, *The girl in the tangerine scarf* (2006) by Mohja Kahf, and *The Translator* (1999), and *Minaret* (2005) by Leila Aboulela.¹⁰ I contend that these texts can be distinguished from many other fictional texts by and/or about Muslims because their main characters' spiritual lives within Islam and their engagement with the sacred are specifically emphasised.¹¹ All these texts are by women writers and explore the lives of women Muslim characters. The novels were selected partly because they are among the most critically acclaimed works published in the last decade in the West, exploring the theme of spirituality in the lives of Muslim characters. Moreover, although, in this paper, I am not concerned with the gendered aspects of experience with the sacred and make no distinction between women and men's religious and spiritual experiences, I believe that, in our time, representations of Muslim women's spiritual lives, for reasons already discussed, is even more crucial than representations of Muslim men involved with the sacred; hence my choice of women writers who write about Muslim women characters.¹²

The notion of the sacred has been variously defined. Emile Durkheim, the prominent sociologist, and Mircea Eliade, the well-known historian of religion, consider the sacred as that which is distinct from the profane, common and ordinary. Eliade, in particular, believes that the divine presence erupts in the sacred thing, though he also maintains that anything can be set apart as disclosing the qualities of the sacred (Livingston 2005, p. 46). Durkheim, likewise, notes that sacredness is a value placed on objects, communally agreed on by specific groups (Paden 2003, p.31). Rudolf Otto, the eminent theologian, discussing the sacred in religions, observes that the sacred or the holy is the root of religious experience (Livingston 2005, p.42). Similarly, Durkheim considers sacredness as a universal feature of all religious phenomena (Paden 2003, p.31). For the purposes of this paper, since the selected fictions are realist novels with Muslim characters modelled on ordinary people, I am especially concerned with the manifestation of the Muslim sacred in what David Hall (1997) calls 'the lived religion', which is, the everyday beliefs and practices of the laity. In other words, I am interested in the appearances of the sacred in specifically domestic settings.

Before moving to a discussion of the novels, I would like to point out that any involvement with the sacred is important because the sacred in our modern, predominantly secular, times is either underrepresented or, as Gareth Griffiths observes, represented, 'as a relic of disappeared past and of outdated modes of knowing' (2001, p.425). Therefore, any engagement with the sacred in literature (or elsewhere) should be taken seriously, especially since a sense of the sacred still matters to many people and since, in Mark R. Woodward's words, 'concern for the sacred is a fundamental quality of humanity' (2001, p.113).

The four main characters in these novels are Najwa, Lily, Khadra and Sammar, respectively. Najwa, the main character of *Minaret*, is a Sudanese woman who has lost her family and financial support as a result of political turmoils in Sudan, and now lives and works in London as a maid. She only finds peace of mind and a sense of belonging after turning to her Muslim religion at this turbulent time in her life. Lily, the main character of *Sweetness in the belly*, is an English girl who is brought up by a Sufi master in Africa. The Sufi master introduces Islam to Lily. Lily lives some of her teenage years in Harar, Ethiopia, though later on, with the outbreak of war in

Ethiopia, she goes to London as a refugee and stays there. Khadra, the main character of *The girl in the tangerine scarf*, is a Syrian-American girl, who is brought up in a highly devout Muslim family and community in Indiana, and who, at a certain moment in her life, starts to doubt her religious community and subsequently her religious faith. However, this moment of doubt becomes a starting point for her to embark on a spiritual journey which culminates in a much deeper faith than she had before. Sammar, the main character of *The Translator*, is a Sudanese Muslim woman, who says goodbye to life in Scotland and her professional life there, after finding out that Rae, the man she desperately loves and wishes to marry, does not want to convert to Islam, a requirement for the marriage of Muslim women. The resolution comes with Rae's conversion to Islam, and marriage between the couple follows.

The main characters are represented in ways that engage the sympathy of the reader. The creation of sympathetic characters who are involved with the sacred can be seen as an important novelistic device for validating many ideas about the sacred presented in the novels. One of the techniques harnessed to create sympathetic characters is focalization.¹³ Najwa in *Minaret* and Lily in *Sweetness in the belly* are the focalisers as well as the narrators of the stories; in other words, the stories are presented from their perspectives. In *The Translator* and *The girl in the tangerine scarf*, there are external narrator-focalizers, who have access to the inner lives of the main characters, Sammar and Khadra, respectively. Both types of focalisation provide the opportunity for the reader to gain insight into the thoughts and feelings of the characters, making it easier to connect with the characters. Another reason why the characters can be called sympathetic is that, although none of the characters is represented as flawless, none of them is depicted as mean, dishonest or insensitive either. The mature Khadra, for example, always treats her parents with respect and humility, even though she does not agree with many of their ideas. Similarly, Lily always works selflessly and beyond the call of duty for the refugees, both in her job as a nurse and in her volunteer work for the reunification of refugee families.

The representation of the Islamic sacred is offered in various ways in the texts. One way is the frequent reference to the rituals and symbols of the religion of Islam, such as the daily prayers, the verses of the Quran, the fasting of Ramadan and azan (the call to prayers of Muslims). These rituals and symbols are important in relation to the

sacred since, as James C. Livingston maintains, we can not point to, address or communicate with the sacred unless through ‘the language and gestures of our own social and historical experience’ (2005, p. 48). Also spiritual moments for religious people are most often created at times when they are involved in religious rituals or are mindful of religious symbols. In this context, it should be noted that, in our times, the very presentation of the sacred in contemporary literary works can be regarded as a way of drawing attention to the idea that the sense of the sacred is still an integral part of the lives of many people. However, in these novels other techniques of rendering the sacred as significant have also been used. In many cases, the representation and upholding of the sacred happen at the same time. In other words, often, when something related to the sacred is portrayed, it is suggested by the narrative as anything but mundane. This happens for example, in the case of the rituals and symbols of Islam. There is almost never merely a passing reference to them in the texts. Rather, those rituals and symbols are represented and reflected on through a tone of awe and admiration, or they are situated in particular meaning-inspiring contexts. As an example, we can refer to a scene in *The girl in the tangerine scarf*, in which Khadra starts to pray again after not praying for a period of time. Her return to prayer is introduced by a rush of the verses of the Quran passing through her mind, building up a spiritual energy that culminates in her starting to pray again. This is how this moment is described:

She called out for a caller to call to her and listened; she was the caller and the call. *Your Lord delights in a shepherd who, on the peak of a mountain crag, gives the call to prayer and prays...* And if he comes to Me walking, I go to him running... *Let not any of you belittle herself...* And no soul knows what joy for them has been hidden. ... *I was a hidden treasure... and I wished to be known.* O soul made peaceful, return to your Lord, accepted and accepting. Come in among my worshipers, and in my garden, enter. *Come to prayer, come to prayer.*

Khadra came to prayer. She felt as though she were praying for the first time, as if all that long-ago praying, rakat after rakat, had been only the illusion of prayer, and this—what she began to do now—was the real thing (Kahf 2006, p.307).

This situating of Khadra’s prayer amid verses of the Quran or religious sayings with the common theme of God’s love for human beings and the possibility

of an intimate relationship between God and people suggests Khadra's prayer in this instance is significant and meaningful, rather than ordinary or habitual . insignificant

Another important way through which the sacred is represented in these novels is through the depiction of physical Muslim sacred spaces. In *Minaret*, for example, Najwa spends a lot of time in a mosque, attending different ceremonies and classes held there. In *Sweetness in the belly*, the Sufi shrines are referred to frequently and the ceremonies which are held there are described. The narratives also present these spaces as valid and important, mainly through having the main characters comment on their and other people's sense of wellbeing in these places. These spaces, as described by the narrators, are not neutral zones. Rather, they have specific impacts on the people who attend them. Graham Howes observes that religious buildings can 'serve as a psychological resource, and they can lead us to a deep wellspring of residual religiosity upon which we can therapeutically draw' (2007, p.76). The narrators of these novels also talk about the psychological effects of attending mosques and shrines on the characters and other people. Lily, for example, reports how in the shrine, people who are singing the religious chants can reach 'a point of near ecstasy' (Gibb 2005, p.43). Najwa, in *Minaret*, thinks about the effects of attending the sacred space of the mosque. On one occasion she says, 'Few people are themselves in mosques. They are subdued, taken over by a fragile neglected part of themselves' (Aboulela 2005, p.2). Given the characterization of Najwa as a religious person, that 'fragile neglected part' might be interpreted as that aspect of a person's psyche that is drawn to spirituality. Najwa also has no doubt that in the mosque she never feels gloomy, and when she leaves the mosque, she is 'refreshed, wide awake and calm, almost happy' (Aboulela 2005, p.243). Moreover, on one occasion, when she is in the mosque she says that, 'I am happy that I belong here, that I am no longer outside, no longer defiant' (Aboulela 2005, p.184). Louis p. Nelson (2006, p.6) drawing on Edward Linenthal (2001) comments that that sacred spaces are especially linked to the socio-political identity of the adherents, rousing in them 'a sense of belonging'. The mosque, as a place to belong, is, throughout the narrative, an important place for Najwa, an immigrant in the West with no supportive family member around. Najwa also believes that the space of the mosque has a unifying effect on the mosque goers, making them all feel calm and serene. For example, she

relishes the memory of the last ten days of Ramadan in the mosque, when, she remembers, all of them were 'listening to the same verses', all of them 'enjoying the same mood' (Aboulela 2005, p.187).

Lily, the narrator in *Sweetness in the belly*, also talks about a similar effect, the unifying effect, of attending the religious space of the shrine, emphasizing that the inequalities of race, class and gender disappear there. She explains that all people feel equal there, as they are participating in similar spiritual experiences.

.... Here, worship was far more colourful: urban Hararis, the men in their starched white galabayas and white neat skullcaps, their wives, daughters and sisters glittering in bright headscarves and beaded shawls; the people of the countryside, Oromo peasants who work in the Harari lands, darker skinned and wearing duller hues than the Hararis, and the herder, sinewy Somalis and their butter-scented wives draped in long diaphanous veils. Landlords, serfs and nomads. Conspicuous wealth, backbreaking servitude and drifting poverty-secular distinctions all erased in the presence of God' (Gibb 2005, p.42).

In *Sweetness in the belly*, there is also a reference to the relationship between architecture and the notion of the sacred. Lily shows an awareness of how the special architecture of the city of Harar, with its mosques and shrines and five gates and five clay platforms in each house, reminding the people of five daily prayers and five pillars of faith, has given this city the quality of the sacred. John Renard, a specialist in Islamic art and architecture, suggests that religious architecture can 'communicate ... at least five aspects of a religious community's fundamentals: ritual practice, cosmology, sense of liturgical time, view of community's history, and the notion of correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm' (Howes 2001, p.77).¹⁴ The way that Lily describes Harar, with its symbolic architecture, corresponds clearly to this view about religious architecture. Of Harar she says:

There was comfort in the order and predictability of our world. Ours was a city of ninety-nine mosques and more than three hundred saints, their shrines organized along seven cocentric circles. There were five gates punctuating the city wall and five raised clay platforms in Harari houses, just as our days

revolved around five daily prayers and our lives were governed by the five pillars of faith. (Gibb 2005, p.271)

In short, these physical Muslim spaces, either mosques or shrines or cities with religious designs, are presented in the novels as significant especially because of their potentially positive psychological impacts on people.

In addition to the conventional physical sacred spaces, such as the mosque and Sufi shrines, these novels also present us with some unconventional sacred spaces. By unconventional, I mean spaces which are sacred for reasons other than specific historical associations or significant architecture. What makes these spaces sacred is, instead, the human agent. The appearance of such spaces in the texts can imply two things in particular. First, it suggests that sacred spaces can be so important to some people that sometimes they need to create them with the help of their imagination. Second, it can also remind the readers that although the experience with the sacred in some cases happens for people when they are in groups, ultimately this experience is a personal one. In *The girl in the tangerine scarf*, for example, we read that, in spite of the presence of a mosque, a conventional sacred space, one of Khadra's friends prefers to create her own sacred space rather than going there. The narrator comments, 'She was deeply religious but not a regular mosque-goer. She dropped in on one occasionally. Didn't think it was necessary to attach to a mosque scene at all, didn't find it troubling not to "have" a mosque. She had a *zawiya* at home, a clean, well-lit corner where her prayer rug was spread' (Kahf 2006, p.367). Another example of the creation of a personal sacred space is a scene in *Sweetness in the belly* when Lily feels the need to pray, she goes to the bathroom of the hospital, spreads her gown as a prayer mat and prays there, turning the bathroom into a sacred space (Gibb 2005, p.203). According to Belden Lane, a sacred place is 'very often an ordinary place, ritually set apart to become extraordinary' (1988, p.21). These examples from the novels represent how extraordinary sacred space can be created out of ordinary space through human agency. Similarly, when Sammar, in *The Translator*, in her trip to Sudan, hears azan, she remembers how in Aberdeen she sometimes tranced herself into thinking that the rumble of the central-heating pipe was the sound of a distant azan, something that could turn her lonely room in Aberdeen into a sacred space:

She had missed it in Aberdeen, felt its absence, sometimes she fancied she heard it in the rumble of central-heating pipes, in a sound coming from a neighbouring flat. It now came as a relief, the reminder that there was something bigger than all this, above everything. *Allah akbar, Allah akbar...* (Aboulela 1999, p.145).

In all the examples about the imaginatively created sacred spaces, the characters involved are Muslims living in the West. The fact that the characters take refuge in their imaginations to create sacred spaces in these novels, as hinted earlier, indicates how important such spaces can be for them to feel contented, and how they can feel about the (physical) unavailability of these spaces in the western context.

People of different cultures can have different ideas about spaces associated with spiritual practices. This point is directly raised in *The Translator*. Sammar, in one instance, complains that in Aberdeen she cannot pray anywhere she wants, the way she did when she was in Khartoum:

On days when Diane was not in, Sammar prayed in the room, locking the door from inside. ... It had seemed strange for her when she first came to live here, all that privacy that surrounded praying. She was used to seeing people pray on pavements and on grass. She was used to praying in the middle of parties, in places where others chatted, slept or read. But she was aware now, after having lived in this city for many years she could understand, how surprised people would be were they to turn the corner of a building and find someone with their forehead, nose and palms touching the ground (Aboulela 1999, p.76).

This point about whether to pray publicly or privately, which has confused Sammar, suggests how ideas about sacred spaces are also culture-bound and how they are part of the adjustments that people have to make when they immigrate to other countries.

Another instance in the presentation, as well as the validation of the sacred, is the way the character's so-called 'premodern' perspectives are treated in these novels. As religious people, all the characters share attitudes and beliefs that cannot be necessarily explained by modern reason. Here I use Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge's sense of the premodern, 'those life worlds of spirits, myths, religions, indeed of

poetry, that cannot be explained in totally modern terms'(2005, p.391), or whatever that to the ideal rational human being of modernity might seem irrational though not necessarily antirational.¹⁵ An example of a 'pre-modern' perspective is the way the system of cause and effect is perceived by many religious people. Many religious people believe that the ultimate cause of actions and events is God, and nothing happens unless God wills it. This religious system of cause and effect is the way the narratives, especially in Aboulela's novels, make the main characters explain certain events. In *Minaret*, for example, if a necklace, the loss of which Najwa is accused, is suddenly and unexpectedly found, it is not simply because she and her employers looked for it. In Najwa's view it is a miracle and the result of God's mercy for her. She says, 'This is the kind of miracle that makes me queasy. ... My stomach heaves. I can lose this job easily. Rely on Allah, I tell myself. He is looking after you in this job or in another job' (Aboulela 2005, p.114). Also, in *The Translator* Sammar does not understand a sentence in a postcard which says, 'get well soon' as she deeply believes that one's health is in God's hands and so thinks that 'I pray' is missing from the beginning of the sentence (Aboulela 1999, p.104).

Many scholars have argued that modernity is mistaken to ignore 'premodern', since 'premodern' is part of the lived experience of many people around the world. Mark R. Woodward, for example, contends that 'an enchanted modernity ... may in the long run prove to be more stable than the secular modernities of the Christian West' (2001, p.113). By extension, Mishra and Hodge state that we need a modernity that 'seems not to accept the incommensurability of the rational and the mystical' (2005, p.395). They especially insist that modernity should not 'break off completely with a premodern past'. Rather modernity should make 'the premodern inhere in it as a significant and empowering trace' (Mishra & Hodge, p.396). The 'premodern' ideas represented in these texts are not treated ironically; rather they are explicitly endorsed. The main strategy in this regard is that, in cases in which the characters use religious or 'premodern' logic in explaining events, those events in the narratives are ordered in such a way that they appear to reinforce the characters' ideas. In *Minaret*, for example, the lost necklace is found just after Najwa has prayed hard for it to be recovered. Thus the text positions the readers to share, or at least sympathise with, Najwa's view that this finding of the necklace at this time might be explained as a miracle.

It can be argued that these novels also challenge some assumptions about the sacred. First of all, these novels question the belief that only mystic elites, Sufi masters or spiritual gurus can commune with the sacred. They do so because the realist narratives represent ordinary people who, in most respects, are comparable to their non-religious contemporaries in the modern world. However, they are, simultaneously, engaged with the religious world. For example, in *Sweetness in the belly*, Lily is a responsible and reliable nurse in a London hospital. She is also the one who burns incense in her backyard to honour Bilal, the saint of Harar, as she believes that saints offer people a ladder to reach God more easily, and she is the one who believes that when she prays she feels as if she is 'not of this time and place' (Gibb 2007, p. 346). The fictional character Lily, like Najwa, Sammar and Khadra, is represented as an ordinary modern person, who, at the same time, can have deep spiritual moments. Lily's case demonstrates how the sacred space is represented as a domestic space, and how the spirituality found in this space is produced not as remote or untouchable, but as immediate and accessible.

Moreover, these novels provide a challenge to the idea that the experience of the spiritual belongs only to religiously compliant Muslims. One striking point about each of the texts is that none of the characters is a strictly observant Muslim, practising absolute religious obedience. Even in Aboulela's novels, in which the characters show the greatest degree of awareness of religious rules and try their best to observe them, Najwa and Sammar kiss or embrace the men they love, to whom they are not married at the time. In *Sweetness in the belly*, Lily has a loving relationship with Aziz, the Harari doctor, who does not live long enough to become her husband, and yet it is only after having such experiences and after opting for less rigidity in the practice and understanding of Islam that she feels that she has matured in her understanding of her religion and in her devotion to it. She emphatically says that she does not want to be orthodox the way some people explain orthodoxy. She says:

... to become as orthodox as this Imam demands, I would have to abandon the religion I know. He's asking for nothing less than conversion. Why would I do such a thing? My religion is full of colour, possibility and choice; it's a moderate interpretation, one that Aziz showed me was possible, one that allows

you to use whatever means allow you to feel closer to God, be it saints, prayer beads or qat, one that allows you to have the occasional drink, work alongside men, go without a veil when you choose, sit alone with an unrelated man in a room, even hold his hand, or even dare I say it, to feel love for a Hindu' (Gibb 2005, p.404).

As we see in this example, it is the personal relationship with God that matters to Lily more than anything else. Some of the behaviours that she refers to and believes are harmless to engage in as a Muslim (having 'occasional drinks', holding the hand of 'an unrelated man') are indeed digressions from the rules of Islam. However, Lily's understanding of Islam seems to be less rule-bound and more spirituality- oriented. In *The girl in the tangerine scarf*, likewise, there is a scene in which Khadra, for the first time, allows herself to unveil outside the house. Doing so, she does not feel disobedient to God or thereby deprived of His love. Instead, this moment turns to one of intense spirituality for her:

The scarf was slipping off. She shrugged. The chiffon fell across her shoulders. ...She closed her eyes and let the sun shine through the thin skin of her eyelids, warm her body to the very core of her. She opened her eyes, and she knew deep In the place of yaqin [certainty] that this was all right, a blessing on her shoulders. *Alhamdu, alhamdulillah.*¹⁶ The sunshine on her head was a gift from God. Gratitude filled her. *Sami allahu liman hamadah.*¹⁷ ... Teta got it. How veiling and unveiling are part of the same process, the same cycle, how both are necessary;....(Kahf 2006, p.309)

This scene suggests how sacred time and space can be created independently of whether the human agent follows particular religious proscriptions or not.¹⁸ Needless to say, I do not intend to make any theological evaluation of the views of the fictional characters here, as this paper focuses on a literary analysis of these novels. However, it can certainly be claimed that these novels challenge the idea of any exact correspondence between religious orthodoxy and the experience of the spiritual and the sacred, and suggest, rather, a kind of flexibility for the sacred.

The novels selected for this study, by offering glimpses into the characters' experiences with the sacred, can also provide an opportunity for exploring the notion of the universality as well as the particularity of the sacred experience. The experiences with the spiritual and the sacred that the main characters in these novels have might sound familiar to some readers, belonging to diverse religious and spiritual backgrounds. Martin Lings, in his book *What is Sufism?* (1975), discusses the relationship between the mysticism of Islam and other religions, and contends that if we think of mysticisms of different religions and creeds as radii, we can say that Islamic mysticism is 'both particular and universal—particular in that it is distinct from each of the other radii which represent other mysticisms and universal because like them, it leads to One Centre' (Lings 1975, p.21). Non-Muslim readers, in their spiritual moments, might have experienced the same feeling of awe, the same feeling of being protected by the divine hand, the same physical reactions such as shivering and crying, and the same feeling of ecstasy, experienced by the fictional characters in their spiritual moments, as depicted in the novels. However, in these novels the verses of the Quran, the space of the mosque, the sound of azan, or other uniquely Muslim symbols and rituals, are what create such feelings in the Muslim characters, thus making their experiences specifically Muslim. For western readers, this suggestion of the similarity between experiences of the sacred is represented through the familiar framework of the realist novel. As a result, these texts may well have the additional effect of persuading readers to accept that Muslims, after all, are not those strange 'Others'.

Emphasis on the idea of the sacred makes the selected novels worthy of attention for another reason too. As hinted in the introduction, fictional works of the type of those explored here, which highlight the Islamic sacred and spiritual, although few in comparison with mainstream representations, still can bring some balance to the representations of Islam in the West. Also, the depiction of some Muslim women's deep spiritual bonds with Islam through these novels provides an alternative to the dominant paradigms of representations of Muslim women in the West as mostly either the victims of Islam and awaiting rescue by the West or escapees of Islam who can only feel liberated in the West. Indeed, these novels, by representing Muslim women who have agency in choosing a religious way of life, have deep relationships with

their religion and take solace and empowerment from it, suggest that the sacred space that Islam can create might well be a place to take refuge in rather than escape from.

¹ See, for example, Byng, M D 2007, Abrahamian, E 2003 and Mishra, S 2008.

² Meyda Yegenoglu (1998), for instance, argues that the desire to penetrate the veil – which places the body of the Muslim woman outside the reach of the Western gaze – has given rise to many western fantasies about Muslim women, and it is one of the reasons why there are so many representations of Muslim veiled women in Western discourses. See also Kahf, M 1999.

³ See, for example, Kahf, M 1999, Kahf, M 2000, pp.149-151 and Mohanty, C T 1984.

⁴ Some critics believe that it is no coincidence that Muslim memoirs which tell the victim story of Muslim women have proliferated in the so-called 'age of terror' because they argue that the plight of Muslim, as depicted in these memoirs, can be harnessed to get public consent for military action in Muslim countries. See, for example, Dabashi, H 2006 and Whitlock, G 2007.

⁵ Fatemeh Keshavarz (2007, pp.2-3) dubs this 'eyewitness literature' the New Orientalist narrative, and as examples of this kind of narrative, among others, she refers to *Reading Lolita in Tehran: a memoir in books* 2003 by Azar Nafisi, and *Kite Runner* 2003 by Khaled Hussein. *The Infidel: my life* 2007 by Ayaan Hirsi Ali is one of the most high-profile memoirs of this type, which attributes most of the problems in Muslim countries to Islam. For criticisms of this book see, for example, Ali, L 2007, Anthony, A 2007, *The Economist* 2007.

⁶ The selected novels have been published in the UK, the USA and Australia.

⁷ See, for example, Detweiler, R & Jasper, D (eds.) 2000.

⁸ Of course, there has always been so much diversity among Muslims, and the idea of the existence of a 'Muslim world' is only an ideological construct, strategically used as a binary opposition to the 'Christian world'.

⁹ Adib Khan is a Pakistani-born, Australian-based writer and the author of *Seasonal Adjustments* 1994, which won 1995 Commonwealth Writer's prize for Best Book.

Mena Abdullah, Indian-Australian, is the author of *Time of Peacock* 1965, a collection of stories about the joys and pains of growing up Muslim in Australia.

M.G Vassanji is a Kenyan-Canadian writer and the author of award-winning novels, *The Gunny Sack* 1989, *The Book of Secrets* 1994 and *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* 2003.

Farhana Sheikh is the Pakistani-born, UK-based author of *The Red box* 1991, which is about the lives of some Pakistani Muslim girls in England.

Ahdaf Soueif, originally from Egypt, is the author of the bestselling novel, *The Map of Love* 1999, which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize for Fiction.

Nurroddin Farah is a Somali novelist, mostly famous for his novel *The Maps* 1986, which explores the theme of cultural identity.

Abdulrazak Gurnah is originally from Zanzibar but lives and works in the UK. He is the author of a number of fictional works, including *Paradise* 1994, which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize for Fiction.

¹⁰ Camilla Gibb, the author of *Sweetness in the Belly* 2005, was born in London and grew up in Toronto. She is not a Muslim. She was chosen by the jury of the Orange Prize as one of the talents to watch for in 21 century. She is also the author of two other novels, *Mouthing the Words* 2001, and *The Petty Details of So-and-so's life* 2002. Her latest novel, *Sweetness in the Belly*, was short-listed for the Giller Prize, was chosen as a Best Book of the Year by the Globe and Mail and amazon.ca, won Ontario's Trillium Book Award and was long-listed for the 2007 IMPAC Award.

Mohja Kahf, the author of *The girl in the tangerine scarf* 2006, is a Syrian-American Muslim writer. She is the author of *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: from Termagant to Odalisque* 1999 and *E-mails from Scheherazad* 2003, a finalist in the 2004 Paterson Poetry Prize. She has won an Arkansas Arts Council award for achievements in poetry.

Leila Aboulela, the author of *The Translator* 1999 and *Minaret* 2005, is a Sudanese Muslim writer. She lived for many years in Aberdeen and wrote most of her works there. She is the winner of Caine Prize for African Writing in 2000 for her short story *The Museum* 2001. Her two novels, *The Translator* and *Minaret*, have been nominated for Orange Prize and IMPAC Dublin Literary Awards.

¹¹ As examples of some other contemporary novels with themes similar to the selected novels see, for example, Abdel-Fattah, R 2005 and Zakiyyah, U 2001.

¹² For examples of works which deal specifically with the subject of women and religious and spiritual experiences, see, for example, Osch, C 1983, Holden, P (ed.) 1983, Ochshorn, J & Cole, E (eds.) 1995 and Falk, N A & Gross, R M (eds.) 1980.

¹³ Following Gerard Genette (1980) and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan (1983), I am calling the perspective from which the story is presented 'focalization', rather than 'point of view'. Genette and Rimmon-Kenan argue that in theoretical discussions of this perspective, the term 'focalization' is more precise than the term 'point of view'. The main reason they indicate for this preference is that in most studies of point of view, no distinction is made between perspective or narration or between 'who sees' or 'who speaks' while the agent who sees (focalizer) might or might not be the same as the agent who narrates (narrator). Using the term 'focalization' helps us avoid this confusion (Rimmon-Kenan 1983, pp. 71-74)

¹⁴ Quoted in Howes 2001.

¹⁵ Mostafa Malekian, the Iranian scholar, argues that religious beliefs can be put into three categories: 1. Those which are rational, 2. Those which are antirational and 3. Those which are irrational. He maintains that what distinguishes an antirational belief from an irrational one is that reason can definitely prove that an antirational belief is wrong while, in the case of an irrational belief, reason can neither definitely prove that it is wrong nor definitely prove that it is right. In other words, reason alone can not disprove an irrational belief (Malekian 1997, pp. 50-56).

¹⁶ *Alhamdulillah* is part of a Quranic verse, the translation of which is 'Praise be to Allah'.

¹⁷ *Sami allahu liman hamadah* is part of a Quranic verse, the translation of which is 'Allah has heard those who have praised Him'.

¹⁸ Many Muslim scholars do not agree that hijab is a religious requirement and insist, instead, that what is required in the Quran is modesty for both men and women (see for example Ahmed 1992, Barlas 2002, Mernissi 1991, and Wadud 1999). However, scholars still argue that hijab should be respected on the grounds that it is an identity-marker for Muslim women and that it represents the freedom of choice that Muslim women should be given in representing their bodies (see for example Zine 2004, Woodlock 2000).

In Kahf's novel, also, though Khadra resolves that she does not need to wear a headscarf to feel close to God, she does not stop wearing it occasionally so as to remind to herself and to the world, among others, what an important part of her identity Islam is, and to remember '*how precious is the heritage!* A treasure fire can not eat' (Kahf 2006, p.313) (italics in the text).

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