


# Chapter 4

## Religiosity as a Boundary–Maker or Breaker in Arab– Anglophone Texts: Leila Aboulela, Laila Lalami, and Mohja Kahf

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter examines the representation of Arab Muslim immigrants' religiosity in Arab-Anglophone literature. Religion functions as a haven for Arab Muslim immigrants after immigration in the face of Western cultural pressure. Previous research has revealed the importance of religiosity to Muslim immigrants' resilience to this pressure. These immigrants' religiosity, from a literary perspective, is, therefore, under-researched. Practicing religiosity in a secular, modern, and Christian atmosphere is challenging. Building on Aboulela's *Minaret* and *The Translator*, Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, and Lalami's *The Other Americans*, and using textual, content, and discourse analysis methods, this chapter explores how religiosity presents a challenge to both these immigrants and Western culture. First and second-generation immigrants are different regarding their religiosity vis-à-vis their response to Western cultural hegemony. Accordingly, religiosity can be an identity-maker or breaker depending on the reaction of these immigrants to this hegemony.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Several studies agree that the largest minor community in Western countries is the Muslim immigrant community (Fleischmann, 2022; Duderija, 2007, etc.). In *Covering Islam*, Edward Said (1981) argues that the West dissociates between church and the State, whereas in Islam, such a division is irrelevant. Therefore, the salience of religiosity in determining the social, cultural, political, and economic life of Muslim immigrants in Western countries seems undeniable. However, the religious/cultural load these immigrants carry with them does not necessarily find a fertile soil in Western adoptive communities. Immigrants are expected to become more religious after immigration in response to the pressures Muslim immigrants experience in adoptive cultures (Fleischmann, 2022; Phalet et al., 2018; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011). These stressors supposedly come from Western cultural hegemony. The focus on Muslim immigrant minorities in research in religious studies, sociology, and theology, according to Fleischmann (2022), is associated with Muslims constituting the largest religious minority in Europe. This chapter focuses on Arab Muslim writers' narrative expression of Muslim immigrants' religiosity and its intricacies in identity-making and/or breaking within the border of encounter with Westerners.

Only the works of Arab-Anglophone immigrant writers are examined here. Therefore, non-Arab Muslim writers and Arab migrant writers who write in languages other than English are herein beyond the focus of analysis. The ideas and theories of postcolonial scholars in religious, sociological, and cultural studies will inform this chapter's argument (Cesari, 2008; Ryan & Vacchelli, 2013; Duderija, 2007; Frederiks, 2015). The chapter draws on Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* (2006) and *Minaret* (2005), Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006), and Laila Lalami's *The Other Americans* (2019) to discuss how religiosity might serve as a boundary-maker or breaker. Notably, these novels focus, among other things, on Arab Muslim immigrants' religiosity and identity negotiation in the Western context. The writers are Arab Muslim immigrants who speak both to the West and on behalf of their fellow immigrants, thereby representing Arab Muslim culture and identity.

This chapter mainly focuses on Arab Muslim immigrants, rather than Muslim immigrants in general. The aim is to examine whether the religiosity of these immigrants strengthen their identity and ease their integration into Western mainstream culture, or rather, it impedes their adaptation into this receiving culture. Besides, this chapter explores the distinction between first- and second-generation immigrants in terms of their religiosity and identity-making or breaking in the hybrid border that they share with Westerners. Cultural differences between these immigrants and Westerners stand out as soon as the religiosity of Arab Muslim immigrants comes to the fore (Brubaker, 2015; Fleischmann, 2022). Hagan and Ebaugh (2003) argue that "the role of religion in the stages of migration process has been overlooked by

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