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BETWEEN WORLDS: NARRATING GLOBALISATION, IDENTITY AND ALIENATION IN LEILA ABOULELA'S SHORT STORIES

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Abstract

The possibilities that come with globalisation and the world becoming a global entity are numerous. Some of these raise intense discourse and questions on the subject of cultural and personal identity; alienation and the expectations that these advocate or threaten in contemporary times. Globalisation as a reality of modern times is replete with paradoxes that provide freedom and limitations ultimately for individuals and nations who negotiate these inevitable realities and spaces that come with the prevailing image of a globalised world. The paper argues that the realities of migration, could be contextualised within the complexities and contradictions of globalisation. Two of Leila Aboulela's short stories are studied in this paper as transnational narratives that recreate immigrant characters and voice cultural and personal identity that confront perceived homogeneity associated with globalisation. The narratives reflect immigrants living between worlds, the conflict engendered by difference and the attempts they make to articulate Self or assimilate the Other in very diverse space(s) away from 'home' and familiar realities. The study concludes therefore that, Aboulela's narratives attest to cultural gaps, conflicted identity, imbalance and the yearnings for a distinct identity as critical.

Keywords: globalisation, culture, identity, Self, Other

Introduction: Why Leila Aboulela Writes

In their seminal work, *The Empire Writes Back*, the authors speak extensively on the potency of marginality in the creative process. They propose that marginality can become an "unprecedented source of creative energy" (Bill Ashcroft et al 12). This proposition resonates through the fiction of Leila Aboulela in great measure. Aboulela is a Sudanese immigrant in Britain. She was born in Cairo and spent her early years up until her mid- twenties in Khartoum before she relocated to Aberdeen, Scotland in the United Kingdom in 2012. Aboulela has since then lived outside Sudan. She writes her narratives in English and makes up the growing numbers of modern Anglophone Arab writers who write their works in English. She has authored five novels, numerous short stories and radio plays. Some of her major published works include: *The Translator* (1999), *Coloured Lights* (2001), *The Minaret* (2005), *Lyric Alley* (2011), *Kindness of Enemies* (2015), *Elsewhere, Home* (2018), *Bird Summons* (2019), and others.

Perhaps for obvious reasons, Aboulela is fixated with migration, alienation, the significance of religio-cultural perceptions and biases that easily thrive between the Self and Others like herself who migrate to world centres and struggle to make sense of their existence, question the difference and mutual misunderstanding of others even in a globalised

world. The inexplicable forces and processes of globalisation seem to appeal to ‘local’ identities and peoples. These forces also threaten boundaries and commitment to indigenous ways that are particularly significant to communities and individuals and foster the emergence of new worlds and identities that must be grappled. Aboulela’s narratives highlight the impact of transnational relations and the impact of globalisation on identities as a significant feature of globalisation in modern metropolis.

Globalisation as a concept is used frequently in the social sciences and probably even more frequently in contemporary times considering its impact and significance. Sasykova Raikhan et al propose that globalisation is quite a popular term and it is used in referring to social processes that influence the social and economic development of the world today. They state that “Globalization describes the acceleration of the integration of nations into the global system” (9). Mauro Guillen argues that when viewed from different perspectives, globalisation is a “contradictory and puzzling process” and it must be approached with open-mindedness considering its consequences (238).

According to Mudasir Habib, conceptualising globalisation is difficult since it “has come to refer to a gamut of variables interlocking and trends so much so that once the term ‘Globalization’ is mentioned it evokes a lot of passion and emotion” (4). Habib states that the concept is also perceived differently depending on which side of the globe an individual occupies or nation. Consequently, in Western Europe and North America globalisation is readily conceptualised as the robust economic prospect available for developing the world and improving the quality of socio-economic life people, usually with the West at the centre of the globalisation process. On the other hand, the Third World perceives globalisation as a deliberate and destructive procedure by the West to enforce its hegemony that fosters diverse forms of inequality of Others (Habib 14). Consequently, “we can say that globalization, integrating and fragmenting the world, uniformity and localization, increased material prosperity and deepening misery and homogenization and hegemony, is a complex process and phenomenon of antinomies and dialectics” (Habib 14).

The paper argues that the realities of migration could be contextualised within the complexities and contradictions of globalisation. We read Leila Aboulela’s short stories as transnational narratives that recreate immigrant characters and voice cultural and personal identities that confront perceived homogeneity associated with globalisation. We therefore argue that, Aboulela’s narratives attest to cultural gaps, conflicted identity, imbalance and the yearnings for a distinct identity and Self as critical. The narratives reflect immigrants living between worlds, the conflict engendered by difference and the attempts they make to articulate Self or assimilate the Other in very diverse space(s) away from ‘home’ and familiar realities.

In Aboulela’s narratives, religion is employed by her characters as a potent means of navigating, overcoming cultural hierarchies and existing as global citizen while minimising the damage to personal identity. Thus, her characters seem to develop beyond the overwhelming impact of western ways and find succour in incorporating Islamic values with new ways of existence without necessarily replacing home (Idris Saba and Sadia Zulfiqar 234). This position also attests that the devotion to religion is a significant means through which Muslim immigrants like Aboulela’s characters ward off the frustration of alienation suffered in foreign metropolis. (Yousef Awad 74). Thus, “Aboulela’s fiction depicts the lives of Muslims in Britain and portrays how Islam plays a decisive role in shaping their identities” (Awad 72). She has won numerous awards for her fiction, including the Caine prize for the short story.

“The Ostrich”: The Paradox of Belonging

In this story “The Ostrich”, Leila Aboulela presents us with an immigrant’s experience in London in the United Kingdom. She queries in this narrative the impact of globalisation, the appeal of multiculturalism and the asphyxiating effect of Other cultures and identity; the crises generated by this difference not only places her against British culture and westernisation but intensifies the sense of alienation. A synopsis of “The Ostrich” is necessary as we examine the realities projected in this narrative.

Returning to London from Sudan after a brief holiday, a young wife and Muslim woman, Sumra is taunted by her now acculturated husband. Almost immediately, on her arrival at the Heathrow airport, she seems to long for the home she has left behind in Khartoum where everything seems so natural and real for her. She is reminded of her displacement by her husband who welcomes her and enforces this sense of displacement when he tells her: “You look like something fresh out of the Third World” (Aboulela 2). Although many times she longed not to return to her husband in London, she seems to grapple more with being different than feeling the loss of home as she takes note of her herself and all the things that define her as different and thus out of place in London. She does a quick but personal appraisal of the things that define her as different and concludes:

And I suddenly felt ashamed not only for myself but for everyone else who arrived with me on that aeroplane. Our shabby luggage, our stammering in front of the immigration officer, our clothes that seemed natural a few hours back, now crumpled and out of place (Aboulela 2).

Sumra not only feels ashamed for herself but every immigrant whose difference remains obvious and consciousness of difference and the significance of same makes homesickness and nostalgia inexorable as Khartoum, Sudan is projected as a safe haven where her personal identity is preserved. She soon shoves away the longing and bond she had with the people on the plane; they shared food, dressing, language and this sense of difference as outsiders in common.

Sumra is married to Majdy, a Sudanese Ph.D student in the United Kingdom. He is hopeful that one day he’ll have the “Dr” in front of his name since his fear of failure has abated and what seemed to be a fear of acculturating successfully too has lessened. Majdy embraces modernisation and westernisation, he wants to be like the British and so does what they do. He insists that they must live like them if not they would be described as backward and barbaric. So, he does what is unusual with people in Khartoum;

He sneers at the Arab women in black *abayas* walking behind ...Here they respect women, treat them as equal, we must be the same he says...and must bear the weight of his arm around my shoulder, another gesture he had decided to imitate to prove that though we are Arabs and Africans we can be modern too” (Aboulela 3).

Homi K. Bhabha avers that, “the paranoid threat from the hybrid is finally uncontainable because it breaks down the symmetry and duality of self/other, inside/outside” (116); thus, Majdy comes to terms with being different but seeks something greater: integration into the mainstream of this British society. He trades his identity, religious and cultural loyalties and submits to the processes of acculturation where indigenous identity and loyalties are usually

tampered with or destroyed. Sumra's assessment of the forces and processes of westernising leaves her drained and hateful of even her physical look. Her mother who cannot understand why she detests London, a place where others wish and pray to visit, thinks she's an ingrate. To her, Sumra, her daughter has the privilege of living a good life abroad, outside the lack and inefficiencies that continually bedevil Sudan and other African nations yet she fails to see this. Sumra is typically the envy of many Sudanese and Africans who long for this kind of opportunity to taste "the good life of the West" (Aboulela 3). On the contrary, Sumra is sad. It is tiring for Sumra that the expectations from the West are high yet the contradictions stare her in the face as a reality. She also finds that she is failing in achieving a major reason for which she is married to Majdy. She is to prevent him from marrying a foreign woman, make him return home and "hold him to his roots" (Aboulela 3); yet, Majdy still day dreams, admires the foreign women on TV and has genuine reasons for not wanting to return to Sudan after his studies. He says to her chagrin:

If I find a way to live here forever, he says, if only I could get a work permit. I can't imagine I could go back, back to the petrol queues, books in the library that are years old, computers that don't have electricity to work on or paper to print on. Teach dimwitted students who memorised their way into university, who never held a calculator in their hands before. And a salary, a monthly salary that is less than what an unemployed person gets here in a week, calculate it if you don't believe me (Aboulela 3).

Majdy has objects, perhaps deep resentment for the 'home' Sumra still holds dear. He has answers to all the her concerns on living, belonging and becoming the like the Other. For instance when she raise questions on the subject of morality, he reminds her easily of the social and political decay that fuels fratricidal wars in Sudan, political avarice, and the lingering conflict between Northern and Southern Sudan.

The aesthetic strength of Aboulela's immigrant tales like this one lies in her use of juxtapositions. She juxtaposes London and Khartoum; the expectations, realities and contradictions, the difference in socio-cultural and socio-religious life that fundamentally fosters the crises and conflict Majdy and Sumra grapple with. Majdy and Sumra are married but they are quite different and their reasons for being and belonging in the United Kingdom are very different too. The paper argues that Aboulela creates Sumra as the "perfect" citizen, who is capable of upholding and preserving her identity. She is created to show Majdy how not to lose his identity, his very essence for being. Sumra's assessment of both worlds, their life in the United Kingdom and in Khartoum projects the opportunities and paradoxes that expose the myth of being at "home" in an increasingly globalised world. This reality is also highlighted in her relationship with "The Ostrich", an old school mate.

The title of the text is significant and metaphoric as it seems to communicate the very essence of Aboulela message. "The Ostrich", the nickname of a former undergraduate and classmate lingers in the memory of Sumra as a worthless fellow because of his looks and unique mannerism that have been foisted on him by an accident. Ostrich's weird look, identity, acquaintance and love advances were all scorned at by Sumra in the past. However, when she discovers on her flight from Khartoum to London that he is married, she is ashamed but admits and fights her jealous emotions. Sumra decides to leave thoughts of The Ostrich and Africa behind when her plane takes off. This seems to be Aboulela's way of stating the realities, projecting the complexities and contradictions that characterise the loyalties of

immigrants to identities and worlds they inhabit. Sumra who is married to Madjy and pregnant with his child must negotiate her new reality: the addition of a baby to their young family, the possibilities of assimilating in the United Kingdom with the formation of a new identity; one foisted on her by her present realities. As with her representations of her immigrant characters in fiction, the complexities of this existence are presented perhaps as a potent justification for the changes Sumra would embrace in overcoming cultural hierarchies and existing as global citizen while minimising the damage to personal identity (Saba and Zulfiqar 234).

Articulations of Faith as Identity in “The Boy from the Kebab Shop”.

The religious orientation of individuals is linked with prevailing cultural configuration which predetermines attitudes and roles at a given time. This cultural configuration dictates, to a large extent, what is conventional, moral, disdainful or otherwise among members of the community. It is from this perspective that “one cannot rule out the fact that culture plays important roles in the identity construction of individuals and at the same time, the sustainability of culture is possible because of those that uphold it”(Azeez Sesan 454). In view of this, we argue that the articulations of faith, home and difference would naturally postulate cultural configuration as the hinge through which difference and conflict is birthed.

Focusing on its different characters’ struggles, “The Boy from The Kebab Shop” presents a broad canvas of issues, multiple forms of narratives, warring cultures set against the backdrop of blurred cultural allegiances. As the narrative begins and there is a Muslim Students Society dinner and call for fund raising, the author sets up the stage for confronting difference. This dichotomy of boundaries is initially represented in the choice of outfits. While many of the female students’ population opted for traditional Muslim attires, others like Diana, flagrantly adorned western casual outfits. Thus, “many of the girls were wearing headscarves, some were wearing Shalwar-khamis, others like Dina wore the student outfit of jeans, sweatshirt and outrageous shoes” (Aboulela 57).

Perhaps, Aboulela is deliberately submitting the dinner event as an archetype of the crisis of existence among Muslim immigrants, not only in the numerous strands of cultural outfits, but also in the entire organisational framework of the event. An organisation where everything or something always goes wrong, thereby making the organisers complicit as an angry student calls them out: “‘You’ve run out of Chapattis, you’re running out of chicken, what sort of organizing is this. Every single function we have, there’s something or the other wrong with the food. You people can never get it right’. He walked away, hungry and angry” (Aboulela 58). This expression of anger and movement away from the place of pain and disillusionment deftly recreates the migrants’ dissatisfaction with the failed African neo-colonist society and subsequent journey to a globally diverse space.

However, the story is about two mixed race young adults, Dina and Kassim, and the difference in their behaviour towards their traditions and religion. As a narrative exploration of cultural difference, the story is mostly told through the voice of Dina, who has a Scottish Christian father and a Muslim Egyptian mother, and equally lives more freely with no strong religious convictions. She sees a Muslim boy she fancies stretched out on the floor praying and is shocked and alienated by the sight. Kassim on the other hand, lives a stricter life, was shy, quiet and reserved with a Moroccan father and a Scottish mum. Kassim’s nationality seems to aptly play on his reserved nature. He was mostly comfortable with making Arab friends at school and with Basheer’s family. Prior to this, his parentage seemed to complicate his life, belief and practices until he begins to interact consciously at judo lessons with dedicated Muslims who recognised his name and awaken his “dormant Muslim identity”:

Kassim's Scottish mother had no interest in religion and no Muslim friends. She was close to her large Aberdeenshire family and Kassim grew up with Christmas and Hogmanay. Most times he felt he was just like his cousins, sometimes, though, he felt he was conscious of his weird name...sometimes an incident would occur or someone would behave in a way that would make him stop, stand still and think. (Aboulela 58).

Unlike Dina, in this story whose lifestyle is English, Aboulela portrays Kassim as the more vulnerable and sensitive one, while Dina the major female character is more outgoing and open to new ideas and the change that comes with her mixed identity and social space, one she refuses to lose so easily to religion and faith.

Aboulela's short story examines the ways in which female Muslim characters articulate their notions of faith and home as a liberating practice. Interestingly Dina learns more about her religion after seeing how closely Kassim follows his. Her first lesson explicitly captures an attempt at Islamic greeting: "It was the first time for Dina to say, 'Salamu Alleikum'. The self-consciousness passed when Basheer replied." (Aboulela 69). This follows her earlier withdrawal, embarrassment and self-consciousness when Kassim welcomed her with this specific Muslim greeting, "She did not reply, only smiled and said, 'I was just passing by'" (Aboulela 65). The connection between language and identity could be exemplified thus:

My insistence is that language fashions a mentality, so it gives its users a shared identity, something that binds them in an inexplicably appealing way. Embedded in this position is the notion that when we speak, people can tell where we come from. Language, then, is not only a means of communication, but also a medium that communicates our belonging to or not to a group (Romanus Aboh 41).

From the above excerpt, Dina's progress and acceptance of the language is a prerequisite for a shared identity and a shared sense of belonging. In contrast, "identity is always a temporary and unstable effect of relations which define identities by marking differences" (Lawrence Grossberg 89). Grossberg's stance therefore places Dina's attempt at a shared identity in a fickle position conditioned by the current effect of her relations with Kassim.

Basically, Aboulela leverages on power dynamics to deftly create an atmosphere where choices are repeatedly questioned. The fact that Shushu, Dina's mother, offhandedly describes and literarily names Kassim, 'the boy from the kebab shop' (Aboulela 68) foregrounds the fluidity in identity construction. Kassim is dispassionately and mockingly alluded to because he chose to work in the shop as a means of supporting himself. Shushu takes a jab at him to further degrade him and as well rid him of all forms of self-esteem. Clearly, Shushu's choice of nameless reference to Kassim, though not justifiable, is understandable. She speaks from a place of anguish, bitterness and yearnings for homeland. Having experienced first-hand the loss her Egyptian family by marrying a Scottish man, she is unwilling to allow her daughter experience a repetition of her own failed trans-cultural marriage. Thus, she warns her daughter Dina, "You'll end up in a horrible council flat with racist graffiti on the wall" (Aboulela 68). In addition to detailing the psychological trauma associated with separation from homeland, the narrative projects Shushu as a Muslim woman whose Islamic faith has lapsed; one who sits, drinks alcohol and watches Egyptian films on cable TV only, in a bid to recover the past. Lindsey Zanchettin observes about Leila

Aboulela's writing that "homesickness pervades her writing, inviting us to consider what constitutes a home and what one will do to return there, even if only through scent and sound" (Zanchettin 40). The text therefore presents a close-up portrait of characters longing for highly personalised and intimately constructed notions of home; where the stories reflect the general path between two cultures, loneliness, love and reaching towards an expression of bridging cultural gaps. In a bid to reflect and refract the historical and socio-economic realities of its environment, African short stories have been able to present those germane issues affecting its contemporary society like migration. Aboulela is writing something more than a Sudanese short story, which transcends the Sudanese worldview, yet seems to fully embody interactions of cross-cultural engagements between African and European borders. This narrative is a reflection on one of the contending issues in Africa- migration. With this story, the author takes the readers on a journey to explore the socio-political and cultural differences of western and Islamic cultures. The kebab shop functions as a site for interrogating contrastive realities of identity, the first being varieties of food choices. While some students are excited about "eating curry and rice off paper plates with plastic spoons" (Aboulela 58), others complain about "lumpy unpopular rice" which they insist, "It's not cooked. Look at it, stuck in lumps..." (Aboulela 58). The narrative criss-crosses these depth of choices in order to set up the conflicted world of African immigrants.

Secondly, Aboulela uses the kebab shop to draw attention to the cultural appropriations involving breastfeeding. According to Majed Aladaylah "transcultural identities are burdened with cultural ambivalences and founded through a process of belonging, dislocation, alienation and assimilation" (Aladaylah 171). From Aladaylah's view point, these cultural contradictions appropriate the manifestation of a conspiracy of shame for breastfeeding, engendering diverse reactions from two women in the text. Samia, a Muslim woman, delays feeding her whining baby until there is no man in sight and quickly quips to Dina, "tell me if anyone comes" (Aboulela 60). Dina, though mixed and acting like the average seventeen year old British girl, is "taken aback, slightly repulsed" (Aboulela 60) seeing Samia breastfeed. Dina is embarrassed by this encounter although she has seen plenty nudity, "she looked away, not wanting this intimacy, shrinking away from what was fleshy and vulnerable" (Aboulela 60). The author highlights these interactions of difference in a way that tries to transform cultural, emotional, spiritual and national differences into assimilation and adaptation. The greatest and perhaps the most phenomenal point of contrast and difference in the narrative is the encounter between Dina and Kassim during his prayer time. The author painstakingly describes Dina's reaction to seeing Kassim stretched on the ground observing his Muslim prayers as shocking and extremely cold. Thus,

It was then that her heart started beating, her blood turned cold, because he was not within arm's reach, because he was down on the ground, and it was a shock to see him like that, so still and grovelling, not searching for something that had fallen, not answering her. It was fear that she felt. And wanting him to reassure her, and wanting the shock to go away. Why was he like that, his forehead, nose and hands pressed onto the floor, why...? He sat up and did not speak to her, did not acknowledge her presence (Aboulela 70).

Dina goes through a plethora of emotions of shock and disbelief, fear and embarrassment and finally apologises for invading his privacy. The prayer conflict is juxtaposed with the same weight of embarrassing reaction Dina would have offered for accidentally pushing the toilet door open and seeing him sitting on the loo. She would have apologized very much in the

same way. As mentioned earlier that religious orientation is consistence with the norms and values of the society, Aboulela's short story situates religion a significant aspect of cultural assimilation, diffusion and interplay in migration discourse. At the end of the narrative, Dina reasons that Kassim:

Was inviting her to his faith, her faith really, because she had been born into it. He was passing it on silently by osmosis and how painful and slow her awakening would be! If she now waited long enough, he would come looking for her. If she went, he would know that she was not keen on his lifestyle, did not want to change her own. (Aboulela 70).

While Dina contemplates the possibility of faith as an expression of a new identity, this, Kassim articulates as his identity. It appears therefore that, Aboulela projects the Muslim faith as attractive and worth holding on to in transcultural interactions. Thus, the author projects Dina's dilemma of assimilation at the end of story, "she paused on the pavement, hesitating between the succulent mystic life he promised, and the puckyish unfulfilment of her parent's home." (Aboulela 71).

Conclusion

Aboulela's narratives are transnational, recreate immigrant characters and voice the difference in cultures, shifting boundaries for immigrants and realities of oscillating in today's world, and more so, the significance of these realities in the existence of an African and Muslim woman in the West. It projects the representations of immigrants between worlds, the conflict engendered by difference and the attempts they make to articulate or assimilate self in a very diverse space away from home. This discussion has sustained emphasis on the significance of difference as resistance to, and as a challenge to, bridging systemic structures between worlds. The texts advocate a blueprint that seeks the overthrow of cultural difference by advocating and redefining dimensions of identity and relations. The paper therefore concludes that the narratives attest to cultural gaps, conflicted identity, difference and the yearnings for homeland as critical.

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