



Understanding Colonial Continuance and Perplexity of Cultural Praxis in Selected Works of Leila Aboulela: A Critical Study

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Abstract

Leila Aboulela, who perceives herself as a 'silent writer' is a Scottish-based Sudanese-origin fictional writer, playwright, and essayist whose insightful narratives are themed on identity, migration, Muslim culture, and superposed East and the West. This study critically examines Leila Aboulela's strategic essentialism against the backdrop of colonial continuance and globalization. It further focuses on how Africa needs liberation from both guilt and gratitude

through the characters who have migrated to England in Leila Aboulela's short stories *Missing Out*, *The Ostrich*, and *Doctor on the Nile*. Migrants in the West often encounter 'colonial subjugation' and at same time are culturally displaced from their own space. In this realm, Leila Aboulela's illustration of Khartoum can be studied in the light of Salman Rushdie's conceptualization of 'imaginary truth'. This research predominantly analyzes the perplexity of cultural praxis through Homi Bhabha's concepts of 'mimicry' and 'hybridity' in the context of Leila Aboulela's alterity in these selected works.

Keywords: Colonialism, Khartoum, Leila Aboulela, Migration, Mimcry, Orientalism

Salman Rushdie in his essay “Imaginary Homeland” contradicts the fact that the past is a foreign country, rather asserts that the past is a home for a writer. Leila Aboulela’s writings similarly apprehend “a lost home in the lost city in the mists of lost time”. The “lost city” in her short stories “*Missing Out*”, “*Doctor on the Nile*”, and “*The Ostrich*” is a city named Khartoum in Sudan, the place where Leila Aboulela herself grew up. Despite the fact her writings flow through her experiences, she subtly differentiates the narrator from the author. Her characters represent the imaginative reality where they contradict each other yet are unified by the perplexity of cultural praxis. Leila Aboulela commutes the challenges faced by the Africans and Arabs in the aftermath of colonization. These struggles continue to appear through language and literature. Contemporary Literature in English has shifted to “Literature in English” from

“English Literature”. Language is not just a resource for communication, but it also carries ideas and images of one's own identity and culture. Leila Aboulela punctures the narrative by often inculcating indigenous words like *tobe*, *zeer*, *qibla*, *Kaba*, *abayas*, *muezzin*, etc to maintain the essence of Sudan although it is written in the colonizer’s language.

In an Interview with Keija Parssinen for *Brittle Paper* Aboulela quotes “Sudan was not an empty, sleepy, passive place awaiting the advantages of British colonialism. In nineteenth- century Khartoum, there was a higher level of sophistication than we are led to imagine. There were hospitals, schools, a printing press, and significant levels of literacy”. The West as we know has appropriated Africa through its discourse. Africa is the amalgamation of different countries and ethnicities. When we talk about African literature there’s a demarcation, a different history and tradition attached to it. Generally, literature from Sudan doesn't strike the world as a part of African literature. Leila Aboulela also normalizes using Afro-Muslim motifs while talking about Arabs and Africa in the Eurocentric literary arena, we often witness Christiansymbols.

Missing Out puts forward the contrasting perception of the two characters Madjy and Samra strangled in cultural translation. *Doctor on the Nile* is an intercultural exchange in the European space that is London and Afro-Muslim space that is Sudan. *The Ostrich* is retranslation through the perspective of a mature female protagonist Samra, a continuation of *Missing Out*. The three prose analyzed in the paper casts the character who are trying to make

connections between Muslims and non-Muslims in a backdrop of colonial history and globalization. With transposition either through the setting up of a colony or later on migration, there is an undeniable flux and hybridity. As soon as there is flux, any culture ceases to exist in isolation.

Migration is a common phenomenon where people leave their place, which is called the place of misery or origin, and then shift to European countries for a better life. Sussan Bassnet describes translation as a “journey between a point of origin and a target destination”, which is also per se

for migration. Leila Abouleila can be seen as a cultural translator. Most of her texts deal with the space of interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims in the West when they migrate or immigrate. After migration to European countries, they are either marginalized in the colonizer's country or there's a creation of in-betweenness. When the migrated natives return to their native land, most of them face cultural displacement.

There is a trace of the continuation of colonization in the form of economy, education, and globalization. The inferiority is internalized wherein natives of the colonized nation believe in the superiority of the White suzerain.

When Madjy, a Ph.D. scholar in London witnesses a beggar, it was startling for him to see a white beggar. “It did not look right or feel right that white people should be poor. It was shameful that they were homeless and begging.

It was unnatural

that he was better off than them”. Madjy although in the process of layering himself in a “White mask”, cannot be

ever white. To become something Madjy is not, he tries to mimic the gestures and chooses the course of action

that would protect him from being called backward and barbaric in London. “He sneers at the Arab women in

black abayas walking behind their men”. He disliked when Samra walked a bit slow behind him and sometimes

he deliberately used to put his arms around her shoulder to imitate colonial norms of equality. Also, in a hope that

the West would eventually disapprove of Arabs and Africans appropriated as orthodox. For Madjy covering one's

head with the tobe and using abayas was a sign of weakness and backwardness as he mimics colonizers without

critically analyzing. He mimics the colonial power to fit into their definitions of being modern. These maneuvers

to disapprove the appropriations by the West, as Fanon observes in *Black Skin White Mask* are an internalization of inferiority not just racially but also culturally. “The black man possesses two dimensions: one with his fellow

Blacks, the other with the Whites. A black man behaves differently with a white man than he does with another

black man. And this self-division is particularly the result of Colonial Subjugation”.

The man who migrated to a European country returns as a radically changed man. When Samra in the prose “The Ostrich” mentions polygamy in front of Madjy’s new friend, he slaps her in a process to renounce their blackness. “They can forgive you for your ugly color, your thick lips, and rough hair, but you must think modern thoughts, be like them on the inside if you can’t be from the outside.” Samra accepts and apologizes to Allah for the face she was born with. Every colonized being has this inferiority complex that is due to their color. Racial discrimination put question mark on identity, nation, religion, ethnicity, and language. This also leads to colonial alienation due to the dissociation of sensibility as a result of dislocation from the social and natural environment. As Ngugi Wa Thiong’o *From the Language of African Literature* quotes:

But the most important area was the area the mental universe of the colonized, the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world. Economic and political control can never be complete or effective without mental control. To control a people is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others. (9)

Missing Out is a story about a migrant Madjy who leaves Khartoum for better education in London. In the process of his Ph.D., he got married to Samra as someone to accompany him in London. Samra as a character oscillates between the essence of religion and alienation in London. There is a cultural translation as they are displaced from their original place to a different destination. However, on the other hand, Madjy portrays the gap between developed London and underdeveloped Khartoum. His speculations are not based on religion or culture but rather on the framed notion of civilization. Madjy after migrating for studies doesn’t want to return to his native land on the pretext of Khartoum being an underdeveloped town. Leila Abouleila employs the readers to question the definition of identity using Samra and Madjy. In the end, we can experience Samra’s inability to survive the comforts of London, and on the other Madjy despite the “pleasure he had denied himself and now forgotten the reasons why”, he is missing his hometown and feels exclusion.

For Samra, the past is the home in the lost city whereas Madjy effaces the past and tries to amalgamate with the foreign land. “The Ostrich” where Samra feels her life in London was a hibernation and someday or the other she

would be having a good life in Khartoum. Samra's Khartoum was reminiscent of the heat, hustle, sunset prayers, dust, long queues for groceries, and Andalusian poet Ibn. For Samra, Khartoum was an "imaginary truth", with its essence, everyday miracles, and chaos. Samra creates an imaginary reality by imagining adjusting her *tobe* after Madjy asked Samra not to cover her head as it would be taken as an orient's notion of patriarchy rather than as a constituent of their choice, culture, and lifestyle.

Leila Aboulela calls herself a silent writer, as her texts are not overtly political while dealing with injustice and cruelty as we can see in most African writers. Although the backdrops are such, it is channelized as political. Leila Aboulela mentions in an interview with Marie Grace Brown the inaccuracy of the representation of Khartoum in movies as well as in "The White Nile" by Alan Moorhead, which was a very racy, colonial take on the whole story". She wanted to shift the narrative to the Sudanese point of view from such inadequate misrepresentation. On the other hand, she also felt "what we were taught at school and university was too nationalistic, too patriotic" and she wanted to "give a balance or show it more realistically".

There is the mention of General Gordon and the Mahdi in the text "Doctor on the Nile". Through the letter, Marion's father mentions Marion's colonial awareness of history. Basic amenities, public health, and hygiene are often a concern for the natives who migrate from European countries. In the letter, Doctor mentions the fact that the students in the colleges and schools are objecting to the name Gordon Memorial College. The narrator being fond of Scottish names questions the measure "Would renaming an institution make much difference?"

"To be named, to have a name, to name implies existence but each has a different connotation in the execution of power". To be named is the position where one is a passive recipient of some established identity. To have a name is a capability to ensure one's identity and assert the act of naming. To name is to have sovereignty over others' identities. According to Dereck Walcott naming like history and knowledge plays a relevant role in power politics.

Leila Aboulela's texts not only deal with the contemporary challenges that are faced as a result of migration but also the challenges that Africa is facing during the process of development.

Various political issues have been cautiously given voice by Aboulela wherein she prefers to distinguish spirituality and politics behind the religion. The Bishop in *Doctor on the Nile* takes up the unrealistic mission of converting Sudanese to Christianity. On the other hand, Leila Aboulela also talks about circumcision, and how Sudanese politics play a role in perversely gaining supporters. The Republican party in Sudan supported circumcision just to oppose colonial interference in their tradition. Both the characters Madjy and even the doctor from *Missing Out* and *Doctor on the Nile* respectively in the text criticizes no book availability in libraries, no electricity, lack of hygiene, internal conflicts, and how corrupt politicians “buy arms to fuel a civil war instead of feeding the hungry” during the 1950s. Whereas London is considered a place of comfort not ravaged by malaria, anemia, or bilharzia and where even the beggars have access to a certain number of amenities. The text also mentions the internal conflict between Northern Sudanese and Southern Sudanese. Somewhere these ideas mark neo-colonialism as a colonialization is still having its grip through the native elite and its influence is quite evident. Madjy has received colonized education, covers himself in colonial attire, talks in colonial language, moreover has shifted to the colonizer’s location.

The short story Missing Out, The Ostrich and Doctor on the Nile are situated in tangible circumstances that impose in-betweenness, as one cannot efface colonial oppression and its aftermath. Colonization baits us to compromise our souls, and spirituality in exchange for better education and lifestyle. Leila Aboulela quotes “This country, he says, bit by bit chips away at your faith.”

In travel culture, there is an illusion of not being contaminated. Belongingness is structured yet it ceases to exist. Belongingness comes with many shared and lived experiences where one is expected to follow a tradition, know a particular song, pray in a certain way, talk in a certain way, act in a certain way, and are expected to serve back, even in many situations marry someone from the same community. It has a specific sign and signifier.

But Samra was aware of her belongingness, unlike Madjy. She was shocked as well as hurt when she came to know that Majdy did not pray, even not on Fridays. Although she expected him to pray, she didn’t impose it, even after they brought the mat for the prayer. She was unconfined and intact and away from colonization and decolonization. Madjy unable to decolonize himself found confinement in Samra for belongingness, “I envy you

because you are displaced yet intact, unchanged while I question everything and I am not sure of anything anymore”.

Africa as a continent in many literary works is seen as an exotic landscape where the colonizers find it difficult to reside. Such incidences are not infamous in Joseph Conrads *Heart of Darkness* among many others where he calls the African landscape as ‘black and incomprehensibly frenzy’, and also the Congo basin as an antithesis to the ‘tranquility’ of Thames. Ironically, Samra enjoys London for a month and then wants to return to her native place as she got tired of her ‘exotic’ and monotonous surroundings. Samra consciously or unconsciously has not been impacted by colonial superiority, she is fond of “talk of jasmine-scented gardens, of a wedding dance, of the high Nile breaking its banks”.

Lela Aboulela implies ‘alterity’ as she creates a character entirely different from herself. *Doctor on the Nile* is an engrossing account of Leila Aboulela where she moves the narrative through a colonial perspective. ‘Going native’ is a derogatory term for anyone from the colony who crossed the boundary and entered the space of the colonized native. There is a space created which is Scottish with clubs and a movie theatre in *Doctor on the Nile* to avoid shared space. The text is epistolary in form, the doctor writes a letter to a daughter who is supposedly in her natural habitat in Scotland. Neo-colonialism thoughts are consciously and unconsciously (as Lord Macaulay’s Minutes to allow Indian ‘natives’ to receive an English education but under certain limitations) about educated Sudanese students and how their too much education is a hindrance

to the world. When Marion imitates the ‘peculiar bridal dance’ in Sudan, it was disliked by her mother Edith. The words and the experience used to express Kartoumn in *Doctor on the Nile* are mortifying and abject. Again, Sudan is described in a similar way Joseph Conrad describes Congo Basin as dreary, savage, and exotic. “Then there are all the doctors who work in the South in dangerous, primitive locations but such far-flung adventurers in dark jungles never appealed to me.”

In the last letter to Marion, we can observe the father appalled at his daughter's decision to bring a Sudanese boy home. Here we can associate the act of Marion as a mimicry on behalf of colonizers. It also creates a ‘third space of enunciation leading’ to hybridity. Hybridity according to Bhabha is a substantial space where a colonized too

affects the colonizer. Hybridity also creates 'cultural differences' rather than cultural assimilation in a productive manner. Scottish in origin, Marion was studying School of Oriental and African Studies and so was Sudanese boy Maccawi in Edenburg, but there couldn't be the concept of reaching the same horizon.

Orientalism is also defined by Edward said as an academic discipline that conducts research on the Orient, as a style of thought that constructs the binary of Occident and Orient to the advantage. The former, and as a corporate institution creates discourse aboutorientin order to control it. (7)

This flow of knowledge is objective in nature. Orientalism inscribes the reality of the Orient rather than a change of conceptualization of the subject. Writings of Leila Aboulela is like Hanif Khureshi, Salman Rushdie, Abdulrazak Gurnah, and many other an act of mimicry where the language is that of colonizers, but it's not in pure form. The question in this context arises not of truth or natural description of the Orient but of value and representation. As Maccawi and Marion, both are reading an orientalist version of African Studies, but according to Homi Bhabha 'orient' punctures the discourse by inserting a few terms which are not in accordance with the Eurocentric audience.

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