Faith as Refuge: Female migration in Leila Aboulela’s Novels

Dr. Eiman Abbas Hassan El-Nour
Associate Professor
El-Neelain University
English Language Department
Abstract:

In most of her works, the Sudanese-British novelist Leïla Aboulela deals with the situation of Muslim Sudanese females in exile. She challenges the imbalance of the relationship between exile, in which the protagonists experience a sense of displacement, and the Islamic identity which, in the end, serves as a substitute for the far away homeland. This article attempts to discuss how faith became the rock in a tumultuous world where identities are tested and re-constructed.

Key words: faith, migration, exile, identity, home, Aboulela, Sudanese women.

المستخلص:

تتناول الكاتبة السودانية ليلي أبو العلا في معظم أعمالها قضية هجرة المرأة السودانية للغرب والتحديات التي تواجهها في مجتمع جديد مختلف يصيبها بالحيرة ويصعب عليها الاندماج فيه بصورة كاملة.

تبرز الكاتبة التمسك بالدين والاتجاه إليه على أنه الخيار الأفضل أو الذي اتفقت عليه معظم الشخصيات النسائية ليصبح ملجأ آمنا في غياب الوطن.
Introduction:

The concept of migration has in the past been applied to two related but different indicators of population mobility. First, people in movement, and second people as movers, and due to the increasing number of people on the move and people likely to move, migration became an important issue of study. The concept of movement views migration as an event much like birth and death, while the concept of movers treats migration as a transition of status similar to a change in marital or employment status.

Relations of power and access to resources determine who moves where, when, how and why. Chant 1998; Chant and Radcliffe, (1992) point out: “Migration is also in itself a part of unequal development, thus resulting in different impacts between females and males serving to reproduce or aggravate the socio and economic conditions in both sending and receiving areas”.

According to the United Nations, 2002, Europe has the highest percentage and the largest number of female immigrants living in the industrialized West.

“The trend towards feminization of migration in Europe is expressed in all components of migration flows. In recent years women have formed an increased proportion of employment-related migration and refugee flows, whereas earlier female migration to Europe was largely via family reunion” (Sopemi 2001).

Migrant women have entered the European Union under different immigration categories and for different purposes that’s why this migration have its significance socially, economically and politically. According to Kofman 2000:
The significance of women's migration to Europe lies not only in its increased numbers, but also in the social, economic and political contribution of migrant women to both sending and receiving countries

Migration has always been a part of the development of literature in Africa. It may have collapsed the barrier between time and space but it has also raised a question about the content of the writing of the migrant writer. The communal value of an African writer or the African experience has been the main thematic focus of the writings of modern African authors. A progressive examination of African literature -that after the arrival of the Europeans on African shores in the 16th Century, slave trade boomed and literature became the only way of retaining whatever identity the slaves may
have. As literature was still in its oral form, passed on from the mouth of one slave to another, it was easy for the slaves to keep folktales from their home and all its valuable lessons in their head and to constantly repeat them to each other as a way of keeping their sanity. This process of migrating texts would continue down the times and rather than demean the African or oral texts, they have provided a means for the African writer to explore his background and give the world a different kind of literary genre. so that the identity discourse will continually change its step and direction and migration will continue to play a role in this process.

Dealing with the concept of migration means to be a part of the social, cultural and economic mobility process and elements of it will continue to filter into the writings of African authors. It has not, in any way become an indication of abandonment of African identity, but rather an affirmation of the right of those writers to be called Africans as they have written what is going on in their society.

The critical perception and reception of African literature has also been enhanced by migration and migrant writers; that’s why migration will continue to influence the path of African literature as writers continue to gain considerable attention to what is known as African literature. The migrating writer may face the crisis of identity and acceptance but in his writings, he can always be assured that his African roots are established.

Migration of women has always been an important component of international migration. Women often migrate officially as dependent family members of other migrants or to marry someone in another country. These migrating missionaries would later be instrumental in the translation of the religious texts firsts and publication of journals to educate the native Africans.

**Migration as a Subject**

Marked as a turning point in 20th century travel-narratives that focus on East-West encounters, *Season of Migration to the North* by TayebSalih was one of the examples of narratives dealing with the experience of exile and colonial humiliation, but above all with the loss of identity of a ‘native outsider’, both in the European diaspora and the homeland. In recent years, Leila Aboulela, the Egyptian-Sudanese author, has gained considerable attention and wide readership as an Afro-Arab author of novels, short stories and radio plays in English. She marks intertextual influences of TayebSalih, the similarities between Aboulela’s novel and Salih’s are many. Both narrate
the journeys of Sudanese subjects to Britain, both opt for the return of the Sudanese subject to Sudan in the end.

In this paper, we focus on female migration in the two novels of Leila Aboulela, 'Minaret' and 'The Translator' in which she portrays a Sudanese heroine living in a foreign land: London in Minaret and Aberdeen in The Translator. In much of this output Aboulela has examined the ways that religious faith, gender and class are translated between cultures. In a unique and deceptively easy style.

Much like her fictional creations, Aboulela’s life has been characterized by movement between a number of different cultures - Sudan, Egypt, Britain, Indonesia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. Movement is variegated within her own background as Aboulela is the daughter of a Sudanese father and Egyptian mother. She was born in Cairo in 1964 but spent her early years in Khartoum, where she was educated at two Anglophone schools: the Khartoum American school and a Catholic school for girls – sister school. After a subsequent degree in economics at the University of Khartoum, she came to London to complete a post graduate degree in statistics. Following her graduation Aboulela moved to Aberdeen for her husband’s work, and it is this city which provides the setting of much of her early fiction. The experience of movement between countries was at time distressing for her as she records in her essay 'And My Fate Was Scotland' (2000):

I moved from heat to cold, From the Third World to the First --- I adjusted, got used to the change overtime. But in coming to Scotland, I also moved from a religious Muslim culture to a secular one and that move was the most disturbing of all, the trauma that no amount of time could cure, an eternal culture shock"

Both her novels, The Translator, and Minaret, depict a world in transformation, people who migrate from one country to another and build new transnational spaces. Aboulela focuses, above all, on women's migration. Her main characters are two women, Najwa (in Minaret) and Sammar (in The Translator), who live by themselves: the former in England, the latter in Scotland. Even though both arrive in the UK with their families, tragedies force them to live alone. Najwa and Sammar, like other Aboulela's characters, come from Sudan, an African country shaken by coups d'etat and poverty. Writing about Islam and Muslims, for Aboulela, is writing about herself. The image of Islam is hers and in defending Islam she is defending her own beliefs. That is why, for of all she has written about Islam and Muslims, she can report: “I have so far written close to my autobiographical situation” (Aboulela, 2007b).
Minaret:

"I've come down in the world. I've slid to a place where the ceiling is low and there isn't much room to move. Most of the time I'm used to it ... I accept my sentence and do not brood or look back." Leila Aboulela's novel Minaret (2005) opens with these words, spoken by Najwa, the young narrator. The first two lines of Aboulela's novel lead us to the main two articulated themes, which are movement and space. Accurately, it is the presentation of movement and space, which grounds the idea of identity in the novel. The story is clearly divided into two separate parts of the heroine’s life: before and after she wore the hijab. Najwa who used to spend her life entertaining herself in Khartoum has faded with the coup that got her father hanged. She turns to hijab wearing and frequents Mosque gatherings after her family’s total change of circumstances in their London exile, after her mother has died of cancer and her brother has been convicted and imprisoned for drug trafficking. Najwa became some sort of a maid, albeit by choice, for a Middle Eastern rich family, and she is haunted by the fear of someone discovering her former identity, the hijab now serves to hide (it would have brought shame on her family, if her work as a maid were to become public knowledge).

This novel tells the story of the forced migration of Najwa, Sudan was replaced by England, this replacement symbolizes the traumatic interruption of time – one life literally stops, to be replaced by a completely different one, ending by finding her own place in a spiritual identity. This spiritual identity itself represented within the concept of migration. In searching for a place where she can feel at home, Najwa is only able to find it in Islam. Aboulela presents religion as a system of life, through which the characters deal with everyday life and build a new community in Europe. Here faith is presented as something that people rediscover and build in the countries to which they migrate. Najwa finds Islam in the UK, as Aboulela did. In an interview with Aboulela she said:

“I grew up in a very westernized environment and went to a private, American school. But my personality was shy and quiet and I wanted to wear the hijab but didn't have the courage, as I knew my friends would talk me out of it." Oncein London, it became easier, "I didn't know anybody. It was 1989 and the word 'Muslim' wasn't even really used in Britain at the time; you were either black or Asian. So then I felt very free to wear the hijab (Sethi, 2005:6)
In Sudan, Najwa’s attitude to religion could be characterized by indifference and neglect. As it is customary, she used to fast during Ramadan, and also she did charity work with her mother. She admitted that family servants pray more than she does, "I had prayed during Ramadan, during which I fasted mostly in order to lose weight and because it was fun. I prayed during school exams to boost my grades. [...] It would be difficult for me to pray, to remember the times of the prayer, to wash, to find clean cloth to cover myself" (Aboulela, 2007:pp. 160-161). In the West, she deals with Islam as something completely new, an overwhelming discovery that made her rethink her past life; “We weren't brought up in a religious way, neither of us. We weren't even friends in Khartoum with people who were religious [...] our house was a house where only the servants prayed” (ibid. 95). In the loneliness of her exile, however, she turns to religion, and faith becomes the only relief to the sudden difficulties and great solitude in which she finds herself.

Hence Najwa’s embrace of Islam is also an act of self-protection, a way of avoiding the dispersal of self that comes with the trauma of migration. In a similar way, wearing the hijab protects her, not primarily from the male gaze, but from the diffusion of her identity (“Without it, my nature is exposed” [186; emphasis added]).

The group of women who led her to embrace religion, helped her to find her identity in religion. The mosque where she learns more about Islam turns out to be the only place where she can find a new community to replace the one she has lost, so that religion for her becomes 'a place' where she finds her identity, in the sense that, following David Harvey:

Places are constructed and experienced as material artifacts. Specifically, religion is –where possible- a non-fixed 'displaced' place: in a world progressively pervaded by a sense of global interconnectedness between economic, political, social, and cultural formations, the nation of 'place' is, somewhat surprisingly, becoming more important. Religion is, in this sense, dispersed, transnational, interconnected, and global, and yet constitutes a local, always rooted and specifically –if not individually-constructed and experienced place.” Harvey, 1989:239
In such a way, religion, as written out in the words chosen by Aboulela, equally produces a space where the narrator finds her identity in. Najwa sets herself to engage in what Aboulela more than once refers to as “the background “of British life.

Through this new faith, she finds a new peace and a new community. What gives her a strong power to cope with her problems is the prayer meetings in the mosque, the hijab which covers her head and the muezzin's voice. Aboulela explains that she wants to show the state of mind and feelings of a Muslim who has faith. *My characters do not necessarily behave as a 'good Muslim' should. They are ... ordinary Muslims trying to practice their faith in difficult circumstance and in a society which is unsympathetic to religion* (Eissa 2005:3). Aboulela thus uses religion as a supplementary space of self and identity. She delivers a message which is Islam enlightens the life of Muslims, she says: "Islam restrains me, but restraint is not oppression, and boundaries can be comforting and nurturing. Freedom does not necessarily bring happiness, nor does an abundance of choices automatically mean that we will make the right one. I need guidance and wisdom; I need grace and forgiveness." (Eissa 2005:3)

In *Minaret*, Najwa dreams of being a child back at her family home, surrounded by her parents' love. The book ends with one of these dreams: "I am not well. I have a fever and I need my parents' room. I need their bed; it is clean sheets, the privilege. I climb dark steep stairs to their room and there is the bed I have been forgetting for" (Aboulela, 2005:276). Najwa suffers from her exile both mentally and physically, being a foreigner marks their daily life. Aboulela said:

*When I was writing Minaret, I was thinking it would be a Muslim feminist novel. The female protagonist is disappointed in the men in her life: her father disappoints her, then her brother lets her down, she becomes very disillusioned with her boyfriend Anwar, and even Tamer – who is represented sympathetically because he's religious like her – even he disappoints her because of his immaturity. At the end, she relies on God and on her faith. That's how my logic went. And I thought that if this were a secular feminist novel, then at the end she would rely on her career and maybe her friends after her disappointment with men. In Minaret, on the other hand, I wanted it to be that at the end she's relying on her faith rather than a career.*  
Aboulela, 2005:276
The Translator

*The Translator*, first published in 1999, is set in Aberdeen. It explores a difficult romance between a recently widowed, veiled Sudanese woman, Sammar, and a Scottish professor of Middle East studies, Rae Isles... Sammar works for Rae at the University of Aberdeen as a translator of Arabic texts, and over the course of the novel, they develop a romantic relationship. The first lines of the novel start with a dream by Sammar, who, at that point, had no sense of who she is or what she wants: "She dreamt that it rained and she could not go out to meet him as planned... She was afraid of rain, afraid of the fog and the snow which came to this country, afraid of the wind even. At such times she would stay indoors and watch people doing what she couldn't do" (Aboulela, 1999: 46). This quote indicates the state of Sammar’s mind, and her depression following the tragic loss of her husband. Wail Hassan describes her life as being "characterized by confinement within her cold, drab room where she is often trapped by the weather, within her lonely existence that she drowns in sleep; and within memories of the past and dreams for an uncertain future." Hassan, 2001:8

Sammar’s husband died in a car accident. She fosters a sense of guilt as she was the one who insisted that he should buy a car. She wishes that her son died in the accident instead of her husband because he can be replaced easily. At home Sammar had suffered alienation and rejection from her family particularly her mother-in-law, who is also her aunt, Mehasen which it is not very different from the alienation of Scotland. Sammar has a sense of displacement, she lives in two places, but doesn’t fully belong to either. Sudan is a major component of her identity: it has a special place in her heart, while Aberdeen represents the foreign land. As we are told that "In better times she used to reinvent the beginning of her life. Make believe that she was born at home in Sudan, Africa's largest land, in the Sister's Maternity Hospital, delivered by a nun dressed in white." (Aboulela, 1999:5)

Because she was born and has lived outside Sudan, she feels that she does not fully belong there, but at the same time she experiences geographical and emotional exile in Aberdeen. Following the sudden death of her husband, Tarig, estranged from her young son who stayed behind in Khartoum, Sammar continues to drift, grieving and isolated because Sudan reminds her of her husband. "To see again the streets where Tarig had ridden his bike, and she had walked every day after school with him and Hanan... To go to where everything happened, her aunt's house; laughter on their wedding, fire when she brought Tarig’s body home." (Aboulela, 1999:39).

Sammar finds herself falling in love with Rae. Twice divorced and a self-proclaimed cynic, he seems to Sammar to come from another world. They are separated by culture and faith, but still drawn to each other. Eventually, after Rae's refusal to convert to Islam, just for appearance's sake in order to
be allowed to marry, Sammar returns to Khartoum. There she realizes that her memories of her past do not match the reality of Khartoum; particularly her mother-in-law's aggression and lack of support make her life difficult. In this situation she misses Rae even more, and prays for his genuine conversion to Islam, and gradually comes to the realization that she was wrong. She should have wanted Rae to convert for his own salvation, not just so that they can marry. Rae comes to Khartoum to look for her, and she and her son return to Scotland with him.

At first, Sammar experiences physical exile in Scotland very negatively. She is far from her family, has lost her husband in such a strange place, and is constantly reminded that she is different, that she somehow does not belong. She experiences what Hoffman describes as effect of exile in depriving the subject of access to the radically different surroundings by "draining the world not only of significance but of its colors, striations, nuances, its very existence" (Hoffman, 1989:107). This comes out very clearly when one looks at Sammar's reactions to her environment--British physical and social landscape are seen as completely opposite to the territories of the past in Africa:

She said that colors made her sad. Yellow as she knew it and green as she knew it were not here, not bright and vivid as they should be. She had stacked the differences; the weather, the culture, modernity, the language, the silence of the muezzin, then found that the colors of mud, sky and leaves were different too. (Aboulela 1999: 39)

Even the comforting acts of worship, such as the collective prayer, did not feel the same:

When she stood her shoulders brushed against the women at each side of her, straight lines, then bending together but not precisely at the same time, not slick, not synchronised, but rippled and the rustle of clothes until their foreheads rested on the mats. Under the sky, the grass underneath it, it was a different feeling from praying indoors, a different glow. She remembers having to hide in Aberdeen, being alone. (Aboulela 1999:146).

This indicates that Aboulela intended to show that Sammar's faith is also a connection to community and landscape. Sammarenexperienced a deep struggle between being a part of a community as in Sudan and an individual as in Aberdeen, when Rae asks Sammar to marry him and come to live with him in Aberdeen she says:
If I have been someone else, someone strong and independent I would tell you, I don't want to go back with you, I don't want to leave my family, I love my country too much." (Aboulela: 1999: 198).

This indicates her confusion between what she says and her real desire. When Sammar is in Aberdeen, she misses being in Sudan and when she goes to Sudan, she keeps on comparing it to Aberdeen. When she migrates to Scotland she misses her typical life: the communal sense of belonging, taking meals together as one big family with her aunt, brother, nieces, cousin and neighbors.

Housework, in the evening a social life, everyone indoors by the elevenO’clock curfew. Visitors or calling on people to offer condolences when death came, congratulations when a baby came. Welcome to the one who arrived from abroad, goodbye to the one who was going away. (Aboulela, 1999: 157)

On the other hand, in Khartoum she misses the independence that she had in Aberdeen, as there is no privacy at all, to the extent that she searches for a private place at home just to read Rae's letters. The events of the novel indicates a complex connection between cultural translation, nostalgia and Islam. Sammar does not only translate for Rae but she is, as the translator, the bridge that connects both cultures, she translates Islam for him. Aboulela said:

I felt that it was important for the theme itself that Sammar's translating. She's not only translating Arabic into English, she's also translating Islam for Rae. She is the agent for his change. She shows him that Islam is relevant to him too and points out that he needs it. She makes Islam attractive by presenting herself as the prize or reward for his conversion. Her insistence (which is immature and egoistical) that if Rae loves her he will love Islam has a strong impact on him. Hassan 2008

Sammar likes Rae because of his knowledge about Islam and the Arab world. Rae refers to himself as an Islamic Expert he can make objective statements about the politics in the Middle East. He says: "I studied Islam for the politics of the Middle East. I did not study it for myself. I was not searching for something spiritual." (Aboulela, 1999: 128)
Outside, Sammar stepped into a hallucination in which the world had swung around. Home had come here. Its dimly lit streets, its sky and the feel of home had come here and balanced just for her. She saw the sky cloudless with too many stars, imagined the night warm, warmer than indoors. She smelled dust and heard the barking of stray dogs among the street's rubble and potholes. A bicycle tinkled, frogs croaked, the muezzin coughed into the microphone and began the azan for the Isha prayer. But this was Scotland and reality left her dulled, unsure of herself (Aboulela, 1999: 19).

In Sammar's hallucination in the quotation above, the memory of place is at the same time a memory of a spiritual experience, because the call for the Isha prayer becomes a part of the nostalgic longing, this indicates the connections between nostalgia and faith. Aboulela explains that she wants to show the state of mind and feelings of a Muslim who has faith as she said: My characters do not necessarily behave as a 'good Muslim' should. They are ... ordinary Muslims trying to practise their faith in difficult circumstance and in a society which is unsympathetic to religion. (Eissa 2005:1)

Several times, Sammar remarks that Rae teaches her things about Islam that she doesn't know. Yasmin, Rae's secretary, also comments on Rae's attitude towards knowledge, telling Sammar that “[western scholars] could study all sorts of sacred texts and be detached (Aboulela, The Translator: 93). Rae himself tells Sammar, I believed the best I could do, what I owed a place and people who had deep meaning for me, was to be objective, detached. In the middle of all the prejudice and hypocrisy, I wanted to be one of the few who was saying what was reasonable and right (Aboulela, 1999: 128).

Rae views the Qur'an as a sacred text, this gives hope for Sammar that he might be willing to convert. When Yasmine, his secretary, refers to him as an Orientalist, Sammar disagrees as she believes that, "Orientalists were bad people who distorted the image of the Arabs and Islam. Something from school history or literature, she could not remember. Maybe modern Orientalists were different." (Aboulela, 1999: 21-22)

A spiritual connection to Allah, Aboulela claims in the novel presented in Sammar's character:

*Her prayer mat had tassels on the edges, a velvety feel, and a smell that she liked. The only stability in life, unreliable life, taking turns the mind could not imagine. When she finished*
As Sammar become emotionally weak after the death of her husband, religion is the only thing that gave her the strength to continue. When she prays or listens to the azan this is the only comfort for her. When she was learning how to drive, she felt that she was going to die.“She turn the steering wheel to the left and instinctively go over the shahadah: I bear witness there is no god but Allah.”(Aboulela, 1999:70). She feels safe under Allah’s protection, comforted, not alone.

In Aberdeen Sammar holds on to her religious identity as a Muslim woman, because it is the only solid and unchangeable factor in her life. The happy ending is evidence of the truth of Islam, it is the new life which is centered on faith and Sammar's union with Rae, rather than the absence of home in its geographical sense, muting feelings of nostalgia. She had been given the chance, and she has not been able to substitute her country for him, anything for him. “Ours isn’t a religion of suffering,” he said, “nor is it tied to a particular place.” His words made her feel close to him, pulled in, closer than any time before because it was “ours” now, not hers alone. And because he understood. Not a religion of pathos, not a religion of redemption through sacrifice. (Aboulela,1999:198).

Conclusion

Both novels present a world in transformation. People who migrate from one country to another and build new transnational spaces, a space where both protagonists find their true identity. Aboulela focuses, above all, on women's migrations. In both novels, a community of women in the mosque provides comfort, solace, community, and access to identity that are otherwise absent in the lonely West. As religion is recoded in these novels as social practice, and psychic comfort, her nostalgic vision seeks an actualization of home in Islam. She presents nostalgia and faith in her fiction as important ingredients to provide the characters with a solid frame of reference. In exile, religion becomes a home from home, and an anchor for a troubled and tortured identity.
References


Aboulela Leila, Minaret (London: Bloomsbury, 2005).


AL Maleh, Layla, Arab Voices in Diaspora Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature, Volume 115 of Cross Cultures: Readings in the Post/Colonial Literatures in English, Rodopi, 2009 https://books.google.com


Hassan Wail, Leila Aboulela and the Poetics of the Islamic novel


Steiner, T,Language and Migration in Contemporary,St. Jerome Publishing, 2009


https://books.google.com/books
http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Strategic+Nostalgia,+Islam+and+cultural+translation+in+Leila...-a0194279515

http://cww.oxfordjournals.org/content/3/1/86.full?sid=e9f9c39a-5670-4d88-b288-60e45221ef16

http://www.wisemuslimwomen.org/muslimwomen/bio/leila_aboulela/


Postcolonial Text, Vol 6, No 2 (2011) “Original Traumas”: Narrating Migrant Identity in British Muslim Women’s Writing,Ulrike TanckeJohannes Gutenberg University, Mainz