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Where the Heart Is: The Concept of "Home" in Leila Aboulela's Short Fiction

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Abstract

In most of her works, Leila Aboulela focuses on Sudanese characters in the diaspora. Her protagonists are usually young Sudanese migrants who had left home in search of a better life abroad, or to escape a desperate reality at home. In this journey, they live in a constant state of exile: the new abode fails to become home, and they are left existing in a state of suspension between the new reality and a past they are emotionally and spiritually stuck in. This paper tackles the concept of home in its actual and virtual manifestations through the lives of her short stories protagonists, their quest for one's identity and keeping (or losing) it when confronting the other.

The female characters are found to be more solid than their male counterparts in their nostalgia and attachment to the original home and its values. This enabled them to keep the fabric of their identity intact. When confronting the other, or when engaging in a relationship, "things do not fall apart" in this encounter. In fact, the other has to compromise to be accepted. This contrasts with the male characters, who are easily assimilated in the new environment, but not without a faint sense of guilt and a fair share of self-deception.

Key words: Aboulela; Exile; Homeland; Identity; Migration; Other

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1. AUTHOR, WRITING HOME

Like Tayeb Salih, who clearly has influenced her writing, Aboulela's writing is the mechanism that takes the writer home, or brings home closer, a remedy for the heart ache of longing. As she herself points out:

> What children see, hear and experience sears itself into their psyche. My memories of the Sudan of my childhood are vivid, and it was homesickness which made me want to hold on to these images and put them down into words. When I returned to Sudan after being away, I continued to look for what was familiar and it was still there, in patches, among the modernity and changes that had taken place over time (Anonymous, 2014).

Aboulela writes about Sudanese people away from home: Mostly young people who travelled for different reasons, but hold similar hopes for a better life. Most of them, however, get stuck in the past; they only physically exist in the new place, but think and speak, and dream, about home. Some stay trapped in a permanent state of nostalgia, and never experience, nor become part of, the new environment. This was the case of Najwa, the protagonist of her novel "*Minaret"*.

"In a way, the book represents my fears," Aboulela explains:

> This is what I fight against. I don't want to get stuck. I don't want to be nostalgic for the past. I know it's pointless, especially as I've got children. They've grown up here and are British, so I have to be British too or else they will leave me behind. (Sethi, 2005)

Unlike Najwa, the author did not suffer the negative effects of displacement. Born in Egypt in 1964 to a Sudanese father and an Egyptian mother, Aboulela grew up in Khartoum. Sudan and studied Economics at the University of Khartoum. After completing an MSc and an MPhil in statistics, she moved to Scotland in 1990 with her husband, an oil engineer. In Aberdeen, she started her writing career while looking after her children. Between

2000 and 2012, she lived in Jakarta, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Doha, before moving back to Aberdeen. Living and relating to two different cultures, and constantly travelling from East to West, she seems to have given the concept of *home* a broader, and more practical, meaning.

> I was always very aware of the differences between people. When I came to Britain, I was interested in life around me. A lot of Sudanese people just keep themselves to themselves. And now, with satellite dishes, it's even worse because they only watch their own television stations. They're going to get stuck in a time warp, and even if they go back to their own countries, they're in for a shock because their countries will have moved on. (Sethi, 2005)

Although Aboulela is not totally cut from the homeland, she embodies that the condition of other "exiled" writers who "are aware that they are representative of our times."

When the margins have invaded and unsettled what was thought to be the centre. The literature of exile is concerned with rapid social change. Learning to live in a world of seeming chaos and flux is a central theme in such writers. Uprooted, unsettled, they are the voices of the instability of the modern world (King, 1992, p.42).

2. STORIES FROM HOME AND AWAY

The short story *"Majid"* is a version of the author's own experience, another "*Sparrow from the East"*[1] trying to adapt to living and being part of a Western culture. That is why it remains dear to the author's heart. Its value was enhanced by the illustration, drawn by the British wife of a famous Sudanese intellectual.

> This is one of my favourite short stories; it is dear to me in a very personal way. When Intangible.org first published it, the Internet was a recent development and I was excited to be part of such a new venture. The illustration is a painting by the wonderful artist Grizelda Al Tayeb and I actually have the original painting. It shows the library of the University of Khartoum and brings back many memories.

Hamid, the protagonist, a man who came from western Sudan with a completely different back ground, language and colour of skin, never expected to marry a Scottish woman. He only saw white people on television, and now his own children are going to be half white. Ruqiyya goes to school, wearing hijab, to collect their three children, Majid, her son with Hamid and Robin and Sara, her children from a previous marriage. People see her with her, two European and one African, children and her scarf, the manifestation of a new adopted religion and look in amazement, and sometimes even anger. But she was calm and wise in handling the situation. Eventually the family was accepted as part of the community.

Hamid's life in London, represents a typical migrant's life in a foreign land: no job satisfaction, often no job at all; issues with permit to stay in the country; culture and language barriers. At the mosque he learnt about a woman who has recently converted to Islam and needed a husband to take care of her and her two little children. Hamid decided to solve his visa predicament by marrying her. The newcomer to Islam became a better follower of the rules and rituals of the religion than him, who was born into it. He used to try and drown his frustration with his job, and his sense of humiliation when he has to mop up the floors at Asda superstore, by drinking alcohol. He remembers his brother and sister back home and pictures their suffering and hardship; this adds to his dissatisfaction and sense of guilt. He plans to repent and stop drinking, but not just yet; when he finishes his PhD, and when he gets a proper job, and doesn't need to work evenings at Asda.

> The exact number of years he had been a PhD student. Don't count, man, doesn't count…his thesis was not going to make it. He must, his supervisor said, stretch himself. His thesis now, as it stood, was not meaty enough. There was a lot of meat in ASDA, shelves. When he cleaned underneath them, he shivered from the cold. Not meaty enough. Johnny Walker was slight and not at all meaty and he was alright, successful, striding along brimming with confidence. Why shouldn't be a man with an unfinished thesis and an ego-bashing job at ASDA sit up late at night, once in a while, settle down in front of the television and sink in. sink into the warmth of the whisky and the froth of the TV. Once in a while? (Aboulela, 2005, p.112)

Nostalgia is a constant theme. The cold faraway land instils in the souls of her characters memories of the warm and familiar past life. In *"The Ostrich"*, Sumra is a Sudanese migrant with a similar story. She comes back from her summer vacation in Sudan. Her husband Majdy is waiting for her at the airport, when he saw her he said *"you look like something new out of the third World"* (Abouela, 2001, p.35). Sumra and her husband have conflicting views about being in England. Majdy thinks that life in London is perfect, he does not hide the fact that he never wishes to go back home:

> 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 dim witted 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, calculates it if you don't believe me. (Aboulela, 2005, p.37)

With all his fascination with the west, and apparent rejection of home, Majdy was not totally devoid of a sense of longing; when he inquired about the heavy luggage his wife brought from Khartoum, she told him that it's the grapefruit and white plaited cheese that he liked, "from the land of famine you bring me food." Again the mocking tone, but I knew he was pleased. They were things he secretly missed (Abouela , 2001, p.39).

[1] The title of Tawfiq Hakim's 1938 novel about exile and the tragedies of East-West encounters.

3. KEEPING THE FAITH

Faith is often employed by Aboulela as a tool of empowerment in the lives of the young female characters. Female protagonists and narrators are always striving to keep their Muslim identity intact in the face of the various distractions and attractions in Western society, with different degrees of success. For Aboulela, a personal, religious identity provides more stability than national identity: "I can carry [religion] with me wherever I go, whereas the other things can easily be taken away from me" (Sethi, 2005).

Sumra sees herself in a country where people see her as a stranger. She feels like a stranger: someone who is totally alienated from her surroundings. As a migrant, she is only existing. Her soul, dreams and good times are far away in Khartoum. She clings to her faith for solace and sustenance, even this is not as natural as it was back home:

> If I was not praying I would stand with my feet crunching the gravel stones and watch the straight lines, the men in front, the colourful *tobes* behind. I would know that I was part of this harmony, that I needed no permission to belong. Here in London the birds pray discretely and I pray alone. A printed booklet, not a muezzin, tells me the times. (Abouela, 2001, p.43)

Her husband, though, wanted to be part of the new setting without forces that pull to the other direction. "Here in London, Majdy does not pray. This country, he says, bit by bit chips away at your faith" (Ibid.). He even forced his wife to get rid of her Sudanese *tobe*, and to stop covering her head

> Majdy says: if you cover your hair in London they'll think I was forcing you to do that. They won't believe it is what you want) so I must walk unclothed, imagining cotton on my hair, lifting my hand to adjust an imaginary *tobe.* (Ibid. , p.42)

In "The Musem" Shadia's attachment to her faith is almost obsessive.

> One day she forgot to pray in the morning. She reached the bus-stop and then realized that she hadn't prayed. That morning folded out like the nightmare she sometimes had of discovering that she had gone out into the street without any clothes. (Ibid., 2001, p.91)

The issue of migrant females who get emotionally involved with British or other Western non-Muslim men is a recurring theme in Aboulela's work. It is, in fact, a logical presentation as Muslim women are not allowed to marry non-Muslims, and this creates an ongoing dilemma for women who find themselves in love with Westerners. Shadia's relationship with Bryan came to an end with a huge sense of resentment to him and his culture as a result of their visit to the African Museum. What she saw inside the Museum was an eye-opener as to how the West sees Africa and its people: as subordinate, naïve savages.

Aboulela is very vocal about the harmful consequences of nostalgia. In her novel *Minaret* Najwa' the young female protagonist was stuck in the past to the point that she could not move forward nor experience the present. "In a way, the book represents my fears," Aboulela explains.

> This is what I fight against. I don't want to get stuck. I don't want to be nostalgic for the past. I know it's pointless, especially as I've got children. They've grown up here and are British, so I have to be British too or else they will leave me behind. (Sethi, 2005)

What the author did is invest into the feeling and turn it into a productive energy. She summoned her creative abilities, and memories of childhood and young adulthood in Khartoum, and started painting home stories from home which helped to sustain her in her new place.

> What children see, hear and experience sears itself into their psyche. My memories of the Sudan of my childhood are vivid and it was homesickness which made me want to hold on to these images and put them down into words. When I returned to Sudan after being away, I continued to look for what was familiar and it was still there, in patches, among the modernity and changes that had taken place over time. (Ibid.)

4. SOLITUDE

"Colored lights", in spite of the cheerful title, is a story of loneliness. The narrator travelled to London to work with the BBC World Service leaving her two daughters with their grandmother. She severely suffers the separation from her husband and daughters. Her husband, Hamed had also migrated to Kuwait for work: "*It seemed that the fate of our generation is separation, from our country and our* family". She was still grieving for her brother "Taha" who died on his wedding day by electric shock when he was fixing the shiny coloured lights. She began her story with the words: "I cried ... *I was crying for Taha or maybe because I am homesick."*

The same emotion is replicated in "*Days rotate"* where the main character is overwhelmed with a feeling of nostalgia'

> I was crying ... maybe because I was homesick, not only for my daughters or my family, but sick with longing for the heat, the sweat and the river Nile. (Abouela, 2001, p.1)

Abouela depicts her Sudanese characters, whether in Khartoum or in the West, as highly attached to home land, faith, and memories. The two young women recall sad moments from their past, and lament a detested status quo, a resented, but inevitable, present.

5. HINTS OF FEMINISM?

Throughout Leila Aboulela's work, her female characters try to take control of their lives through different techniques. In *The Museum,* the narrator, Shadia, travels abroad to obtain a post graduate degree in defiance to her fiancé' whom she left in Khartoum. Furthermore, her relationship with Bryan, the British man she met in Aberdeen, was also an one-woman show. She influenced

him to change many aspects of his character, attitudes and ultimately his religion to please her. This strong inclination towards self-assertion and a sense of rebellion could be attributed to Shadia's family life in Sudan. Her father married another woman, which was, socially and religiously, an acceptable act, but for her mother, the idea of a co-wife was totally objectionable. Consequently, she got a divorce and raised her six daughters on her own, with no financial support from the father who cut off all ties with the family.

In *The Musuem* Shadia's adherence to her faith and rituals provides her with a sense of fulfilment and wellbeing;

> One day she forgot to pray in the morning. She reached the bus-stop and then realized that hadn't prayed. That morning folded out like the nightmare she sometimes had of discovering that she had gone out into the street without any clothes.

She asked Bryan to adopt Islam, to which he seemed to be willing and enthusiastic and displayed a passionate interest to go on a trip to Mecca.

This issue of migrant females who get emotionally involved with British or other Western non-Muslim men is a recurring theme in Aboulela's work. It is, in fact, a logical presentation as Muslim women are not allowed to marry non-Muslims.

The author herself went through a comparable stage of dislocation when she came to Britain for her post graduate studies. Being away from her familiar surroundings, she clung to the safety of religion. She found no constrains in visibly projecting her faith.

> 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. 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).

In fact, most of her protagonists become more religious in the west. This might be a very natural way of trying to find an old and familiar place of safety among a multitude of new and unfamiliar environs. the new place offers a certain type of freedom, the freedom of being who you really want to be. You are your own master in the absence of the patriarchal society back home. In spite of the common misunderstanding about restrictions on Muslims to express their religious beliefs, Aboulela confirmed that she never felt that her faith limited or restricted her being part of the society; when she was asked if she thought that there was more freedom for Muslim women to be religious in Britain, she replied: "Oh, definitely. But then you have to decide what you are going to do with all this freedom…You can do what you like, So being religious is one of the things I chose." (Ibid.)

Religion, as a uniting and alienating factor, is the main theme in the story *Something Old Something New*, where a young couple find themselves between cultures, unable to feel at home either in the west or in Africa. The protagonist was alienated in his homeland from his own people because he converted to Islam. His decision was met by dismay from his friends and his parents. The female protagonist, on the other hand is a Sudanese woman who lives in Edinburg. In spite of her love for her country and family, she was not eager to return home, because she was a divorced woman and this fact carries many negative connotations within the conservative Sudanese society. She wishes to stay in Edinburg. She is a stranger in Edinburg, conspicuous, as a Muslim woman would be in a Western country. She looks aloof and alien, even when trying to blend and have fun; even the man who admired her felt the alienation:

> It was windy, a summer wind that carried away the hats of tourists and messed up peoples hair. Because her hair was covered she looked neat, slightly apart from everyone else. It made the outing not as care free as he imagined it would be. (Aboulela, 2005, p.130)

For the male protagonist in the story, Islam provided answers to the questions he used to ponder before, when he was depressed and saw no purpose to life. It also saved him from drowning in drugs and depression after his failure as a medical student. Falling in love with a Muslim girl was not as easy as adopting the religion. The issue of culture, family and language became a huge barrier that confronted the two lovers who were about to become husband and wife in Sudan. The country was too hot and harsh, there was no privacy or any sort of physical intimacy allowed; many members of her family were constantly present and watching. Her brother kept talking to her in Arabic which he felt was rude. To make matters worse, his passport and his camera were stolen. The theft incident brought out a side she never saw in him; he was almost out of control with anger, cursing everything around him. All in all, the confrontation with the new, and totally different, culture was not easy for both protagonists. However, time, real exposure and tolerance brought them, and their different cultures, together in the end.

This reconciliation which came after an initial confrontation followed by understanding and acceptance is an important recurring theme in Aboulela's fiction. The notion of home as the place where the heart is played in a very interesting way; the place of exile is where the young Sudanese woman felt comfortable and safe, and where she found true love, also, the young British man travelled all the way to Africa for a surrogate home, following his heart. This might raise the question about the possibility of imagining and creating a homeland.

6. FINDING THE SELF

The Boy from the Kebab Shop is a story about finding home away from home. It is a sweet love story between

Dina, a girl whose father is Scottish and her mother is Egyptian. Kassim is also a mixed race child; his father is Moroccan and his mother is Scottish. Dina's mother was disowned and deprived from inheritance by her rich Egyptian family for marrying a foreigner. She despised her husband until his death because he was not able to offer her the life she thought she would be living in Britain or even the life she was accustomed to in Egypt. "Everything shrunk when your father brought me here," she keeps saying to Dina. He was "the good-looking *khawagah*", who had pursued and enchanted her at the Gezira Club in Cairo, whisked her off her feet and away from her family, and brought her to a drab life in a drab place. "In Scotland he lost the charisma that Africa bestows on the white man, and became the average kind hearted father that Dina grew up with." (Ibid., p.56)

Shushu, Dina's mother is constantly sitting on the sofa, watching Egyptian films on television. Her companions are the gin bottle and Panadol tablets. She watches home on the screen, tries to forget where she actually was with the help of alcohol, easing her hurting with pain killers. Nostalgia and aching for home are crippling her and preventing her from being the mother her daughter needs. She is rejecting the West and clinging to the image of the lost homeland. Dina, on the other hand, as a product of both cultures resigns herself to reading the English subtitles on Arabic movies to be able to understand.

Both Kassim and Dina were not exposed to Islam as children from two Muslim parents would have been. Kassim's judo classes "awakened his dormant Muslim Identity'' when he met and became friends with Muslim boys. However, he had always felt that he was somewhat not like his maternal cousins in Aberdeen, with a name like Kassim and "a father who spoke English with a funny accent" (Ibid., p.58). The Muslim Students' Society became like a second home to him. Dina's mother, on the other hand was not about to teach her daughter anything about Islam; she was not leading by example either, as she herself was lost and uprooted.

The final scene when Dina came into the staff room at the Kebab Shop and saw Kassim praying presents a moment of confrontation with her other self, or half self, the side with had always been there, but never touched or approached, that made her feel at home with Basheer and Samia and their baby at the Kebab shop. Kassim's actions, forehead, nose and hands pressed onto the floor, totally immersed and out of reach, scared and disturbed her. She loved him but she was in a shock:

> She stood very still her back to the Kebab Shop, her eyes glued to the tyre of a parked car and seeing nothing. He 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 out looking for her. If she went home he would know that she was not keen on his lifestyle, did not want to change her own. She paused on the pavement, hesitating between the succulent mystic life he promised, and the peckish unfulfilment of her parent's home. (Ibid., p.63)

This short story poignantly reflects the situation of a young person torn between two worlds, worlds that are different in many ways but at the same time not parallel and impossible to meet. Each one of the protagonist carries the two inside; in the blood that runs through their veins. Both were searching, for a way, or a place where they would be complete. The process is, evidently, painful and with a considerable degree of sacrifice but ultimately rewarding and satisfying.

CONCLUSION

The notion of *home* as a physical place or a state of mind, is a complex one. The question which comes to mind after reading Leila Aboulela's stories is: could a place of exile ever be turned into a homeland? And would a place of birth be considered home even when people feel exiled inside for various reasons? And could religious identity, and the freedom to express it, replace or be a sufficient substitute for geographical attachment?

Writing about home seems to be the remedy most writers in the diaspora undertake to ease the pain of homesickness. As King puts it, exiled writers "whether from white or third world nations, share a similar psychology".

> [T]hey write semi-autobiographical novels in which the difficulties of taking root in England are transcended by writing about it. They end by a celebration not of assimilation but of self creation through writing. This, then, is another major theme of such writers, their condition of alienation and exile and how through writing they have given order to life (King, 1992, p.40).

Aboulela eloquently addresses the question whether modern day Sudanese society is an amalgamation of nostalgia and exile:

> In the 80s and 90s, Sudan witnessed a significant incidence of brain drain. Many university graduates left the country to work either in the Gulf or Europe, the US and Canada. I belong to this generation and I remember clearly that we did not hesitate in leaving. We did not doubt that it was the right thing to do and that we "deserved" the kind of life and jobs that suited our qualifications. The effect of this exile on our mental health, on family ties and on the identity of our children were things that were not considered, or at least, brushed aside. What our "hosts" thought of our culture and the pressures to assimilate were also overlooked. Fiction gave me the space to explore these issues, to reflect on the impact of this movement. Modern day Sudanese society is defined by who left and who didn't leave, who returned and who didn't. Add to it the internal movement of those displaced by the civil wars and the Southerners leaving to South Sudan after the secession—and you get a repeated sense of a tearing away and a scramble to fit in which, on failure, morphs into nostalgia. (Anonymous, 2014)

King (1992, p.41) maintains that there is a noticeable lack of nostalgia among exiled writers of recent years.

They do not yearn for any "idealized traditional culture or childhood disrupted by colonialism or expatriation". The fact that the world has become so easily accessible, and the fast rate of change brought by globalization, does not permit such idealization. Most writers who returned home were disillusioned and saddened to discover the home they knew is no longer there. As Abouela has done in most of her work, writers and protagonists try to continue living the idea of homeland by transporting some features from home (such as religion, rituals, music, food, etc.) to provide a surrogate homeland.

There is a gender dimension to reactions to exile and lost homelands. Most of Abouela's female protagonists hold tight to the idea of homeland, and this feeling protects the fabric of their identity against being disturbed or consumed by the other. In most cases, especially when there is an emotional involvement with the other needs to come into the fold, and not the opposite. And this decreed by religion. In the case of Bryan and Shadia in the *Museum*, and even in the case of Najwa and Rae in the *Translator*. Things do not "fall apart" in the encounter, as it was the case with Mutafa Saeed in Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, or with Okonkow in Acehebe's *Things Fall Apart*. This is because they cling to the original home, which prevents them from become "at home" in the diaspora, unlike male characters, who seem to embrace the new home, but not without a sense of guilt.

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