

# The Bliss of Belonging: Reading *Elsewhere, Home* by Leila Aboulela

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**Abstract:** *The present paper tries to understand the themes of migration, displacement and the meaning of belonging to a place with reference to the short story collection Elsewhere, Home published in 2018, written by critically acclaimed Sudanese writer Leila Aboulela. The paper also tries to comprehend the meaning of home as it gives one the sense of identity and belonging. The paper looks at the complicated lives and identities of the minorities, war affected refugees and immigrants in Diaspora and the way they think about the true meaning of home and a sense of getting accepted in a foreign land.*

**Keywords:** Identity, home, displacement, migration, war

## 1. Introduction

Leila Aboulela's fictional characters are influenced by her own life because she herself has been to different cultures/places like Sudan, Egypt, Britain, Indonesia, Scotland, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. Migration has been an important part of her life as Aboulela is the daughter of a Sudanese father and an Egyptian mother. Leila Aboulela was born in 1964, she is a Sudanese writer but currently based in Scotland and writes in English.

Aboulela's most recent works are the novel *Bird Summons* (2019) and the short-story collection *Elsewhere, Home* which was published in 2018 and became the winner of the 2018 Saltire Fiction Book of the Year Award. Aboulela is also the author of novel *The Translator* (1999), a New York Times 100 Notable Books of the Year, *The Kindness of Enemies* published in 2015, *Minaret* published in 2005 and *Lyrics Alley* published in 2011. *Lyrics Alley* was Fiction Winner of the Scottish Book Awards and short-listed for a Regional Commonwealth Writers Prize. Leila was the first winner of the Caine Prize for African Writing. All three novels namely *The Kindness of Enemies*, *Minaret*, and *Lyrics Alley* were long-listed for the Orange Prize and the IMPAC Dublin Award.

The entire human history is full of events that at some point changed the complete course of history. 9/11 attacks and the subsequent "war on terror" is also one such event of human history. These events not only affected the political and the government system but also the social life, literature and art. Literature could not remain immune to this horrific event and this event led to a growth of significant literary activities throughout the globe that revolves around this event. Leila Aboulela also got influenced by this event and made this event an important theme of her writings. The present paper tries to understand the themes of migration, displacement and the meaning of belonging to a place with reference to the short story collection *Elsewhere, Home* written by Leila Aboulela.

*Elsewhere, Home* is a longing for home, it is a collection of 13 short stories; this collection brings together Leila Aboulela's earliest short stories from 1990s to her latest fiction. *Elsewhere, Home* is an observation and exploration

of connections, disconnections, generations, places, cultures and traditions across boundaries.

The first story in this collection is a story titled "Summer Maze" it follows the story of an English teenage girl Nadia and her mother Lateefa who is of an Egyptian origin. It tells the story of their yearly visits to Cairo from London to spend Nadia's summer vacations. Every year Nadia and Lateefa visit Cairo to spend the vacations with Lateefa's elder sister Salwa. Salwa has a son Khalid, Lateefa always used to dream that she will get Nadia married to Khalid but her dreams get shattered when she comes to know that Khalid is already in love with a girl named Reem and Salwa is happy for the choice her son has made. Nadia is also comfortable with Khalid marrying to Reem as she never wanted to marry Khalid or settle down in Cairo.

Aboulela tells the story first from Nadia's perspective and then from her mother Lateefa's point of view. Nadia does not enjoy these visits because she wants to spend her summer vacations back at home London with her friends, but every year she makes these visits to Cairo for her mother. "Nadia's life was a zigzag of these annual visits that sometimes stretched into every single day of the holidays and made the September return to school feel abrupt and unfocused" (Aboulela 4).

Identity is a term that deals with the relationship of an individual with the society the individual lives in. "The notion of the Self is the consciousness of one's own identity" (Burke and Stets 9), this very idea of self and identity gets complicated when one is displaced into a foreign land. According to M. Castells identity is "the people's source of meaning and experience" (6). Our identity gives us a sense of belonging to a particular group, culture and tradition, as Kath Woodward states that "Identity provides a link between individuals and the world in which they live. Identity combines how I see myself and how others see me. Identity involves the subjective, and the external. It is a socially recognized position, recognized by others, not just by me" (Castells 7). Since identity is very much connected with the society it becomes very difficult to deal and define it when one migrates into a new society. Thus identity remains one of the most important aspects of

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an individual's life and this concept of identity is questioned and doubted every time when one moves into another land.

When people belonging to a specific culture, history, tradition and nation leave their home and migrate to a new place and build a new home a sense of loss always follows them because the new world treats them as the other. In a new place they always think and imagine their homeland and this imagination is called the "third space" in the words of Homi K. Bhabha. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha describes the concept of otherness as "an articulation of difference contained within the fantasy of origin and identity" (67) because this social, cultural and racial otherness makes the migrant subject feel alienated and displaced in the new world the person has moved in. Aboulela also questions the exclusion of Muslim migrants who have willingly accepted the cosmopolitan society of the English world.

As Bhabha asserts the dispersal / 'scattering' of people in exiled spaces call for a 'gathering', and only from these gatherings 'emerge a historical fact of singular importance'(139). Aboulela focuses on one such gathering which resulted after the 9/11 attacks as the Muslims were segregated on the basis of religious, social and cultural differences irrespective of the number of years they have been staying in Britain or US. These people felt a sudden shock of identity crisis as they were reduced to mere Muslim stereotypes and the way they were labelled, because this labelling affected their identity in a very negative way. In the same way Sammar one of the major characters of Aboulala's 1999 novel *The Translator* gives expression to her frustration with labels as Sammar articulates her feelings by saying "In this country [England] everything was labelled, everything had a name" (Aboulela 4).

Aboulela throws light on the fact how these attacks played an important role in the construction of a colonial discourse and promoted an American nationalistic rhetoric which did not include any of the Muslims who have been staying in U.S since years. The Muslims who considered themselves as a part of U.S were suddenly seen as the other/foreigner. One can refer to David Richards and Shirley Chew here as they explain how traumatically regimes/colonizers react to people, as they try to corner them in the narrow angle of "otherness" by "substantiating" a society's 'corporeal schema' with an image of alienation and domination where (the regime/colonizer) looks at the world and sees only a reflection of an imperial power" (Richards 11).

David Richards and Shirley Chew further raise a question on the fact how regimes and colonial powers operate to prevent the formation of any "workable forms of social and cultural life" by merely imposing new models and ways of "psychological dependence" that target the lives of people with more domination and making them feel more inferior(11). In the same way Muslims were targeted, they were questioned and they were made to feel inferior, barbaric and uncivilised. Aboulela gives words to this feeling in her novel *Minaret* published in 2005 as she writes: "as Muslims our self-esteem is so low that we are desperate for approval and what greater stamp of approval can there be than a white man's approval?" (Aboulela 159).

*Elsewhere, Home* explores the themes of home, longing, belonging, loss, alienation, assimilation and displacement that comes when one leaves one's own homeland to peruse a new life in a new world. Lela Aboulela gives voice to all those who by their own choice or by force leave one's own homeland and navigate between two worlds and two identities. As Avtar Brah also argues that "the question is not simply about who travels, but when, how, and under what circumstances?" (Brah 182). Because after leaving one's own homeland one is always desperately in need of a language to articulate the meaning of home and belonging and also the impact of being in another land has on a person's self identity because within the person is constantly in a dilemma of belonging as the person is not sure whether he belongs to this place or to that place.

One feels that one belongs to both the places but the reality turns out to be bitter as one realises that one is not welcomed in either place. The country they migrate to always considers them outsiders and the people of their homeland start believing that they are no more a part of their homeland. The migrants adapt the new culture as well as they try to preserve their own culture but this further complicates their lives as no one understands the emotional trauma they go through in this process. They try to adjust into both the worlds but it becomes difficult for them as they start leading a complex life. They try to fit in both the worlds but they are considered unfit everywhere.

The short story "Summer Maze" also questions the existence of a migrant who is constantly having a dilemma of being half this and half that, living half here and half there and is not accepted fully anywhere. For example Nadia and Lateefa they both have a very confused idea of home. Avtar Brah questions the very idea of home as she writes: "where is home? On the one hand, 'home' is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense, it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin'. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of locality, its sounds and smells" (Brah 192).

In this short story Aboulela beautifully captures the complexities of having multiple identities at the same time, the feeling of belonging to two or more places yet not getting accepted anywhere, the terrible feeling of adapting into a new culture yet also trying to preserve one's own culture, for example the following lines, "in Cairo, she was a stranger, but a stranger who went unnoticed, who was not tricked into paying extra for taxi rides and souvenirs. The effect was like a disguise, a role she was playing in an over world which did not demand from her much skill or strategy. She could not really think of herself as Egyptian, nor did she want to" (Aboulela 5).

Nadia does not want to be called an Egyptian because she considers London as her home and she believes that she belongs to London not to Egypt. But her dreams are shattered when she goes for sightseeing with her cousin Khalid and his fiancé Reem and overhears a British couple. "The accent made Nadia homesick for London. She moved towards the couple, drawn to their familiar tones, eager for a flicker of recognition, an encouragement to say hello. But

when they looked up at her they saw someone different from them, an Egyptian girl at the foot of that large pyramid in Giza. Nadia forced herself to speak out because she needed this encounter now, needed to make this link” (Aboulela 12). She makes an effort and talks to them, because she wants to prove her identity, for her this becomes a moment of self assertion and claiming one’s identity.

These immigrants are always conscious of the different worlds they are living in, though Nadia considers herself to be a British but at the same time she is also conscious of the fact that “the English couple were Londoners like her; she could speak their language and warm to their moods. But she was not a tourist and for her Egypt could never be a holiday destination like Jordan or Greece. Desert, pyramids and sphinx were embedded in her DNA. They were her heritage whether she wanted it or not” (Aboulela 12).

In *Citizenship, Identity and the Politics of Multiculturalism: The Rise of Muslim Consciousness*, Nasar Meer also raises the same issue. Meer centres his argument on the different ways British Muslims seek to get a recognition and acknowledgment in a society which is treating them as the other but they consider themselves an important part of that society. They find it very shattering when their loyalties are questioned and suspected. Nadia wants to be accepted she wants to be known, she is this she does not want to be seen as that. She wants to be known as someone who she really is from inside not as someone who she looks like from outside. She wants to tell everyone that no matter she looks like an Egyptian but she is a Londoner like this British couple. She succeeds in having a brief conversation with the British couple and after that “she walks back to Reem and Khalid feeling refreshed” (Aboulela 12).

Nadia and her mother is now an outsider in the county of their origin that is Egypt but the irony is they are considered an outsider in London as well and this becomes a major problem for them. Through this short story Aboulela makes her readers visit Egypt she also shows the readers a glimpse of Egyptian culture, she focuses on the minor details like the huge number of luggage the Egyptians carry with them wherever they travel, for example one passage in the short story goes as “the next challenge taken up by the flight crew was to find enough storage space for the hand baggage of the Egyptian passengers” (Aboulela 4). Once Nadia asks her mother “why do people in Egypt lie all the time? When Tante Salwa (her aunt whom they pay these yearly visits) has visitors why does she always tell them to stay longer when they get up to leave? She does not mean it, she wants them to go and she is relieved when they go” (Aboulela 13). One can also take into consideration the following passage “the aversion to cousins marrying is something the English taught her, something a girl brought up in Egypt would not feel” (Aboulela 18). “These were the Egyptian complexities Nadia would never appreciate” (Aboulela 13).

Nadia and her mother, both are homeless and displaced into their homeland as well as in the foreign land. They have many identities but not a single identity accepts them. Where are you from? This question haunts both of them as Amit Saha mentions that “displacement introduces dynamism

between past and the present and identities have to be defined continuously” (7).

The mother and the daughter both are torn between two identities and two homes. In front of the British couple it becomes necessary for Nadia to assert her identity and establish her personal presence, in the same way Lateefa also becomes a victim of identity crisis. She leaves Egypt to settle down in London and in the process of adjusting into an unfamiliar world she loses connections with her origin. As her sister Salwa tells her “by going away you have become more old fashioned. Things here are not as conventional and innocent as in your youth. Lateefa you are lagging behind. It is as, if by being away, time stood still for you” (Aboulela 17). It becomes a terrible feeling for the migrant subject because one leaves home in search of a fortunate future but in this process loses connections with ones past and ones people. Migration is not very simple and easy, one has to pay a huge price in this process. Here one can also think of the novel *Funny Boy* written by Shyam Selvadurai wherein the protagonist of the novel Arjie articulates his feelings when his family had no option but to move to Canada and leave Sri Lanka as the entire Tamil community living in Sri Lanka was attacked and targeted by the Sinhala community, Arjie says that “we are going, not with the idea that something delightful awaits us, but rather with the knowledge that great difficulties lie ahead. I find it impossible to imagine our world will ever be normal again” (Selvadurai, 309). Lateefa’s elder sister’s remark further complicates her already complicated life as she says to herself “Salwa cannot understand the fears that haunt a Muslim woman bringing up children in the West” (Aboulela 16).

This paper also tries to understand her approach towards the most common problems like stereotyping Muslims and their culture as all Muslims were made to feel insecure after the 9/11 attacks and their loyalties were questioned and their identity was doubted. In this short story Aboulela also throws light on the experience of being a part of both Muslim and non Muslim societies. In the present short story Aboulela also mentions briefly about the Islamic faith but her narrative is very different from the typical clichéd narrative of an Islamic society. Through the character of Salwa, Aboulela is trying to represent a progressive Muslim society as Salwa who has always been in Cairo informs her younger sister Lateefa who is now a resident of London that “things have changed and young people make their own choices nowadays. Khalid and Reem are in love and want to be together. How can I stand in his way?” (Aboulela 16).

As R. Radhakrishnan believes in finding the “Indian-ness within” being in Diaspora in the same way Leila Aboulela’s characters look inward to understand their identity being excluded in the English world. *Elsewhere, Home* makes its reader to question the concept of home whether a home is a feeling, or a very deep emotion or a state of being. For her a home is a place where one feels a complete sense of belonging, where one is never asked or expected to justify one’s own presence, where one may be taken for granted but is never made to feel inferior, a place which gives one agency, freedom of speech, safety, respect and love. Laila Aboulela also questions the concept of self and the other and

she encourages her readers to explore the ways in which our all cultural, political, social, historical, religious differences can be merged in order to create a human society which believes in justice, equality, love and peace.

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