

Constructing Arab Western Identities Through Metamorphosis in Leila Aboulela's *Bird Summons*

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Received: July 23, 2023 Accepted: August 25, 2023 Online Published: September 7, 2023

doi:10.5430/wjel.v13n8p202

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v13n8p202>

Abstract

The current study explores the way Leila Aboulela uses metamorphosis in her novel *Bird Summons* (2019). The study also shows how Aboulela's three main characters construct their identities as Arab living in the West through metamorphosis, where they reach to what Homi Bhabha calls "The Third Space". That is, they are transformed into different shapes and creatures due to the problems they are exposed to in the West as Arabs. They remain as such until they reach a stage where they overcome their issues and adopt their new identities as Arab Westerners. The novel is approached through postcolonial views, and especially Edward Said's views on Orientalism and how the West sees the Orient. It is also explored through Homi Bhabha's views on "the Third Space". There are few studies that are conducted on the current novel. Most of the studies conducted are done on the quest of the three characters and not on how they transformed through metamorphosis.

Keywords: Metamorphoses, Leila Aboulela, Third Space, Bird Summons

1. Introduction

This study attempts to show that in Leila Aboulela's *Bird Summons*, each of her three main characters go through metamorphosis and transform into different objects and shapes due to the difficulties they are exposed to in the West. The study also attempts to show that, after their transformation, they reach what Bhabha (1994) calls "the Third Space" (p. 23). This is where they reach their new identities as Arabs living in the West and create new lives for themselves as they amalgamate the two cultures. It is noted that, after their transformation, they reach more rational solutions for their issues and become more aware of their particular situations in the West.

Leila Aboulela is one of those diasporic Arab writers that reflect the issues of Arabs in the West and how they are often exposed to difficult conditions and situations. Unfortunately, these issues seem to be increasing constantly despite the fact that Arab communities in the West have become more visible over the past few decades due to social, cultural, economic, political and demographic motives. The most crucial issues that Arabs in the West are exposed to are Islamophobia, discrimination, unemployment, and prejudice against Islamic practices. Added to that, Arabs still do not have the same rights as Western citizens. They are still dealt with as foreigners while at the same time still asking that their culture, identities and rights to be recognized (Idriss and Abbas 2011). Arabs are marginalized, oppressed and treated disparately from the natives (Ismael and Ismael 2010). This treatment is mainly caused by the image of Arabs that has been circulated and exaggerated in the West (and, indeed, the world), especially after the attacks of 9/11 in the U.S. and 7/7 in the UK (Santesso 2017). Indeed, the bias against Arabs increased of those attacks. The stereotypes have grown to relate Arabs to violence, terrorism and radicalism. As a result, this is perhaps the biggest reason that some Arab writers wish to reflect the real image of Arabs and defy the stereotypes about Arabs that have been promulgated since those attacks (Gana 2008). Moghissi (2010) mentions some terms that have been added to the already well-known stereotypes about Arabs such as "backwards", "merciless", "oppressive", "violent", and "terrorist" (p. 1).

These stereotypes are related to the cultural representations discussed by Said (1978) in his book, *Orientalism* and the way the East (the Orient) is viewed by the West (the Occident). Said defines Orientalism as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said 1978, p. 13). It is "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'" (p.10). Unfortunately, scholars, writers, and other thinkers "have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point" for elaborating their literary, social and political works in relation to the Orient (p.10). In other words, it could be discussed in terms of dealing with the Orient "by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, teaching it, settling it, and ruling over it" (p. 11). It is also related to the way the West (Occident) gained "strength and identity" through being in an opposing position to the Orient, "as a sort of surrogate an even underground self" (p.11). According to Said (1978), the Orient is "discovered" and "created" to be "Orientalized", and the "relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony" (p.13). Going thoroughly through Said's views on Orientalism, one could note that the cultural representations, and stereotypes of Arabs only occur in the "Western consciousness" (p. 13). Said relates power with knowledge in that power can be gained through knowledge. The West's knowledge of the East is their way of controlling the

East. Then they represent them the way they want from their own prospective, which is really a misrepresentation. The Eastern is represented by the West as “barbarian, exotic, sensual, and cruel.” That is, he is the opposite of “civilized, normal, and rational” Westerners (Singh 2017).

This leads to Gramsci (1986) and his views on hegemony. Said uses Gramsci’s hegemony and declares that the hegemony of the Western thoughts about Arabs and the Orient is what created the superiority of the West and the inferiority and backwardness of the East (p. 15). Santesso (2017) adds that the narratives that have been produced after the attacks of 9/11 and 7/7 are mostly responses arising from the misrepresentations of Arabs. Abdul Majid (2015) continues by saying that these stereotypical images are the reason behind the increase of Arab writers who write about the Arab issues in the West and who try to present Arabs in a positive light in their narratives. One of these writers is Leila Aboulela who, through her many writings, has tried to mirror the real image of Arabs without distortion. She also tries to reflect Arab issues in the West as a result of these stereotypes (Ancellin 2009).

One of the issues that Arabs have to deal with is that they are always watched and closely scrutinized as if they are aliens from another planet. As a result, they are often harassed and bullied by Westerners because they look “suspicious” (Sunier 2010, p. 125). This then brings us to the problem that Amghar, Boubekeur and Emerson (2007) discuss and that is the problem of discrimination. Arabs, and especially veiled women, are often discriminated against in the West whether it is at work, in school or in public. Arabs are sometimes excluded from certain kinds of employment and labor (Idriss & Abbas 2011). This may be due to the various stereotypes that surround them. (Suleiman 2009). Amghar, Boubekeur and Emerson (2007) agree that the problems of discrimination against Arabs can be found throughout all of Europe and North America. This leads to the necessity of creating new discourse as it relates Arabs and stereotypes. Ramadan (2004) adds that Arabs in the West are in the process of creating their own Arab personalities and identities that are mixed with Western culture and society. He also calls for Arabs living in the West to unite and create their own communities and integrate with the Westerners in their political and social lives, so that they may spread a better awareness of themselves.

The new discourse that Boubekeur and Emerson (2007) encourage Arabs to have and the new identities and personalities that Ramadan encourages Arabs to create and develop are all related to what Bhabha (1994) called the “Third Space” where they blend “a sense of home” with “a space to which they belong” (p.23). In this way they try to overcome the challenges presented by their new culture and language by creating a kind of balance in their lives in a stage where “disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other” (Pratt 1992, 6).

This study explores Aboulela’s use of metamorphosis to help her characters be able to cope with living in the West. The study tries to show that Aboulela’s three main characters go through metamorphoses and transformations into different objects and shapes because of the problems and issues they are exposed to in the West. The study also attempts to show that, after their transformations, they reach what Bhabha calls the “Third Space” where their new identities as Arabs living in the West create new lives for themselves by mixing the two cultures together. It is noticed that after their transformations they become more aware of their situations in the West and reach rational solutions to their problems.

2. Literature Review

Starting with Franz Kafka (1912), who uses metamorphosis in his novel, *The Metamorphosis*, which is generally about Gregor Samsa, a travelling salesman, who wakes up one morning to find he has changed into a huge insect, but still retains his human feelings and thinking. Crick (2009) states that isolation and depression are important themes in many of Kafka’s works. This isolation is what leads to the transformation of his characters. J Klaudinyi (2005) states that Kafka presents characters that are ordinary people living their ordinary lives that he suddenly uses to lead the reader to surprises and unfamiliarity. This happens in a way that he “inverts, reverses or manipulates classic fairytale motifs in his stories” due to the fact that he resists traditional tales (p. 2). He tries to show the metamorphosis or “the transformation of a human or object into an altered form”. Still, this idea did not start with Kafka, but many authors who came before him such as the Grimm brothers used this same idea. In fact, Klaudinyi (2005) defines transformation (or metamorphosis) as “a frequently used supernatural motif originating in ageless tales passed on from era to era” (p. 3). Klaudinyi (2005) also states that Kafka has adapted fairytale motifs to create his own “grotesque or uncanny tales” that are continuously adapted by other writers and scholars (p. 8). Matthew Powell (2008) asserts that in Kafka’s animal stories “otherness becomes a subjective point of view to be explored and experienced.” In representing this perspective, Kafka’s narrative challenges “the notion of a stable, coherent self” and cultivates a grotesque aesthetic “to demonstrate the otherness that lies within the self” (pp. 140-141).

A main concern of modern theoretical approaches is that “metamorphosis happens to someone, to a subject” and that subject becomes “the other”; however, the person or the thing remains mostly the same (Mikkonen 1996, pp. 309-311), for as Brunel (1974) states, metamorphosis does not really change the person or the thing. When it comes to Kafka, the “grotesque” is mostly presented by his “animal stories”. By using the animals as the protagonists, he attempts “to explore the tension between human and non-human—the same tension that exists between self and other”. In this way he reflects “animal fables” (Powell 2008, p. 130). According to Egon Schwarz (1986), these animal stories have their “roots in a prehistory when consciousness had not yet learned to distinguish between man and animal, when people still believed the possibility of slipping from one to the other, entirely according to desire or need” (p. 84). This is due to the fact that animals have their own characteristics.

Bishop et al. (2015) state that metamorphosis could include the transformation of non-animals, too. Metamorphosis and its different forms such as shape-shifting, “therianthropy (animal transformation) and borderline identity (or the co-existence and interchange of two identical modes of existence)” are used by different writers to “serve several psychological purposes” (p. 49). One of the diasporic writers,

who uses metamorphosis in his writings, is Rawi Hage. Abdel Nasser (2016) analyses Hage's three novels where the protagonist in each novel transforms into a cockroach. Hage uses metamorphosis and shapeshifting to reflect oppression and repression in the West. Hage tries to deliver the "dehumanizing experiences of inequality, poverty and discrimination" that any Arab could suffer from in the West (p. 49).

This paper attempts to prove that Aboulela uses metamorphosis as a way to show how her main characters reconstruct their new identity as Arab Westerners. Aboulela is a contemporary Sudanese writer who lives in Scotland. She has written a variety of literary works since starting her writing career in her mid-twenties after she moved to Aberdeen, Scotland, including *The Translator* (1999), *Minaret* (2005), *Lyrics Alley* (2011), *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015), and *Bird Summons* (2019). Her literary works are renowned for their distinguishable exploration of "identity, migration and Islamic spirituality" (Aboulela, About Leila). Very few studies have been conducted on Leila Aboulela's novel *Bird Summons*. One of these studies is the study by Arkhagha and Awad who explore the use of magical realism in the contemporary Anglophone Arab narrative and the role of magical realism in constructing the Arab British identity of the characters in Leila Aboulela's *Bird Summons* (2019).

In *Writing as Spiritual Offering: A Conversation with Leila Aboulela* (2019), Parssinen asks Aboulela about her experience in writing and the points that she intends to express in her writing as an Arab immigrant in the West. On a question about Aboulela's reflection of home, the Arab region and culture, Aboulela responds by saying, "My fascination with the idea of home and my intense homesickness led me to accept the Sufi concept of the soul having a spiritual homeland different than that of the physical body. Our bodies are at home on earth, but our spiritual homeland is the heavens. [...] With regard to my writing, I found that with time my characters started to feel more at ease in Britain" (Aboulela 2019, p. 29). In another way, Aboulela tries to state that her writings about Arab/Muslim hybrid identity is what helped her overcome her homesickness.

Aboulela adds that in her novel, *Bird Summons*, the characters' "homecoming experience is a surreal spiritual journey in which objects take on subjective meanings and [the characters'] bodies experience transformations reflecting their specific dilemmas and challenges" (Aboulela 2019, p. 29). In the review of *Bird Summons*, Viswanathan (2020) highlights how Aboulela focuses on the "spiritual journey trope" which is a combination of magical realism and real fiction that leads to strengthening the relationship among the three females (p. 34). Viswanathan also focuses on the hoopoe bird in Aboulela's novel and its role in storytelling that presents certain teachings (p. 34). On the same line, the review of DeZelar-Tiedman (2020) shows how the novel reflects the compound "domestic realism" and "fantasy/allegory" while accomplishing their transformation (p. 77). Since it reaches its conclusion in its last chapters DeZelar-Tiedman finds the novel is "a bit heavy-handed if intriguing" (p. 77).

Englund (2020) declares that the three Arab Muslim women characters in *Bird Summons* (2019) had the chance to recognize themselves as Arab Westerners. He goes on to say that the novel is different than Aboulela's previous novels, which are mainly about religion and migration, while in her current novel "the women's search for meaning and guidance is not solely defined in religious terms" (p. 1).

3. Analysis

Aboulela's *Bird Summons* is about three Muslim immigrant women in Britain, each with a different background and a different reason for coming to the West. The novel opens with Salma, Moni and Iman, planning to go on a road trip to the Scottish Highlands to visit Lady Evelyn Cobbold's grave. According to the narrator, their aim is to "honour [Lady Evelyn], the first British woman to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca". This is because they wanted to know more about Islam in Britain and to follow the path of Muslims by whom "this island was an inherited rather than adopted home" (Aboulela 2019, p. 1).

The novel can be divided into three stages: the pre-transformation stage presenting the lives of the three main Arab characters before their metamorphosis; the stage, where the characters go through the process of metamorphosis or transformation; and finally, the post-transformation stage which reflects the characters' new lives in the West.

As noted, it is in the second stage where the three Arab protagonists transform, all reflecting individual changes which have a vital impact on their lives. In the first part of the novel, the protagonists are each exposed to a variety of issues that any other Arab living in the West might face. Then, in the second part, they go into a stage of transformation where they metamorphose into different creatures and shapes to change. After this, they emerge from their metamorphoses in the third part with new identities as British Arabs and are now able to cope with the problems of living in the West as an Arab.

Thus, this paper attempts to prove that it is the transformation or the metamorphosis of each of these characters that helps them change and rebuild their identities, and thereby reach Bhabha's Third Space. Arkhagha and Awad (2021) state that Aboulela tries to help her protagonists overcome their homesickness "through 'spirituality', eventually making her characters feel more content in Britain" which, in a way, reflects what she herself has been through in the West (p.118).

Before Transformation

In the beginning of the novel, the three female protagonist - Salma, Moni and Iman - state that they want to escape the city. They are fellow travelers - together, yet not together - all summoned by Fate to take the trip. As for Salma, she really has the desire to visit Lady Evelyn's grave. Iman wants only to be with Salma. Then there is Moni who wants to join Salma and Moni but is worried about the amount of walking involved (Aboulela 2019, p. 20). Actually, what the three characters really want is to escape is both the way that they are looked at by the people around them and the issues that they are exposed to in the city with the city reflecting mainly Britain, but also

the West as whole at the same time. These issues are introduced by Aboulela from the beginning of the novel, where the narrator describes the issues of each character and how they feel about their surroundings.

Salma is a massage therapist married to a Scottish convert she met in Egypt and was by her parents to marry. Before that, she had a colleague named Amir in medical school whom she wanted to marry, but her parents refused. This creates a conflict within Salma, especially after she leaves Egypt for the UK with her new husband. She does not forget about Amir and keeps thinking of the life she could have had with him. She always imagines what her other life would have been like and always tells herself that she wants a “completely different” life than the one she has now. The other Salma would have been a doctor by now instead of a massage therapist. If only she had not been married and gotten pregnant which caused her to twice fail her qualifying exams (Aboulela 2019, p. 11). Still, she presents how she sees herself as inferior to Westerners through the way in which she always tries not to embarrass her husband in front of his friends and relatives. She does not want to him to be ashamed of her “to feel that he had picked her up from the back of beyond, and so she became more careful” she thought “she was not British enough” (Aboulela 2019, p. 42). Another example of how Arabs think Westerners are more educated and have better knowledge could be seen in the way Moni sees Salma as her son’s therapist. When Moni knows that Salma is an Arab therapist, she questions her professionalism and knowledge, thinking British therapists are better educated and more professional (Aboulela 2019, p. 30). This conflict and inner struggle occurs because of how she perceives herself as inferior to her husband, his family, her kids and, indeed, to all of British society.

For years, scholars have been writing about how Arabs view the West and how they look up to the Westerners. El-Enany (2006) is one of these scholars and states that Arabs have looked up to the Westerners as better people since at least the 19th century because of all of their technological advancements and the improvements they have contributed to mankind since then. For this reason, they look at them as role-models who they want to imitate. He continues by saying that in most of representations, Arabs tend to admire Europeans more than the Americans because Europeans were the first to contribute to improvements in science, technology and knowledge. After World War II, however, world power moved from Europe to the United States. As a result, it can generally be said that, whether it is Europeans or Americans, Arabs perceive the West as superior (p. 154).

Dhabab (2005) adds that the Arab’s concern for the West has increased after the nineteenth century because of colonization and imperialism. Many Arab intellectuals have since been motivated to imitate the West and what they practice (p. 101). According to Dhabab (2005), most Arabs go to the West assuming that the West is more knowledgeable about things; therefore, Arabs can gain more power and strength by living in the West than they could by living in the East (p. 209). Ahmed (2010) discuss how most Arabs are fascinated by the West, its people and its modernity. Ahmed (2010) suggests that this applies more to Arab females than Arab males, as Arab females seem to try harder in their efforts to copy Western women in their thinking, education and strong presence (p. 30). Dhabab (2005) comments on the same point saying that the Western woman is the idyllic female in the eyes of Arab woman because women of the West are seen as being better educated with stronger personalities (p. 212). On the other hand, it cannot be ignored that some Arabs view the United States specifically in a negative way because of their government’s support of Israel and America’s occupation of Iraq. As a result, the United States is viewed by some Arabs as “a repressive world power” and as “hostile to the reactionary legitimate aspirations of small nations in the world” (El-Enany 2006, 154).

One of the points that makes Salma feel inferior to her husband and kids is that she has no control over her children. She says that the “more they grew away from her” they become “more British and less a piece of her” (Aboulela 2019, p. 8). This is because they are supported by their British father and are free to do what they believe in. This is exemplified by Selma’s daughter. Since Salma was not able to achieve her goal in studying medicine, she wants her daughter to study medicine. However, her daughter rejects an offer to study medicine and decides to study sports science instead (Aboulela 2019, p. 8).

This is what forces Salma to turn her thoughts over to her colleague Amir and what could have been. She keeps thinking about the other life she could have led where people like her and treat her as an equal. Because she feels like an “outsider” – indeed, like a “foreigner” – to her husband and children, this makes her imagine what she could have had (Aboulela 2019, pp. 41-42). This is why she responds to Amir and his messages. She feels that he is the same as her, not different. As a result, this acts as sort of an escape from her life in the West. Even Moni and Iman think that Salma suffers more than they do since she is married to a Scottish husband and because of her “weak roots” (Aboulela 2019, 41).

With Amir, Salma feels superior and respected. He tells her that, to him, her exams are valid and she will always be a doctor in his eyes. The point is that she is in the wrong country (158). He also tells her it’s not too late to take the exams again and constantly encourages her to do so (129). She connects to the past (Aboulela 2019, p.134), and whenever she decides to stop sending Amir messages, she changes her mind because of how she feels when she is with him (Aboulela 2019, p.70).

Moving to Moni, she has a son named Adam with severe cerebral palsy and has never spent time away from him (Aboulela 2019, pp.4-5). She feels so stressed out from taking care of Adam and starts thinking of leaving Adam in the nursery, staying with him there, and can help the nurses with the other children. However, for now, she needs time for herself which is why she decides to go on this journey with Salma (Aboulela 2019, pp. 6 & 8).

Moni also suffers from an inner conflict where she has to choose between her son and his medical treatment and Murtada, her husband and Adam’s father. Murtada works in Saudi Arabia, but her son needs special treatment that cannot be found there. Murtada wants his wife and son to join him in Saudi Arabia while Moni thinks that the West is better for her and for her son. In fact, while talking to Murtada

on the phone, she tells him, “Here is the best place for Adam. Here is where he’s getting the right treatment; he might even go to a special school” (Aboulela 2019, pp. 23& 24). Mona refers to Britain (and the West) by using the adverb “here”.

Disabled people often need constant health care, daily medical treatment and checkups, special equipment and facilities, home or outside nursing, and other services which may lead to very high costs. They also need psychological, medical, and social support (Al-Jadid 2013, p. 453). When it comes to Saudi Arabia specifically, the “main causes of disabilities are cerebral palsy and developmental delay followed by road traffic accidents”. The issues regarding medical treatments result from “low access to poor families, low service coverage (no long term care, no palliative), and low quality of services in public agencies” (Al-Jadid 2013, p. 455). This is due to the fact that most Arab people do not report about these cases for cultural reasons. As a result, there is a great ignorance of the types of disability among Saudis that has resulted in a decrease in the amount of research into the number of disabled and everything concerning them such as is done in the Western countries. Added to that, in the Arab world in general, there are no specialized institutions for disabled people which could provide statistics for understanding the needs of these people and their issues (Al-Jadid 2013, p. 455). For these reasons and more, disabled Arabs, and especially females with disabilities, have been hidden (Al-Jadid, 2013; Al-Jadid 2014; Madi, Mandy & Aranda 2019).

From the previous examples, Aboulela shows a serious conflict that Moni and her husband have between them. First, Murtada seems to totally ignore the existence of his disabled son which is part and parcel for his culture. This could be understood from how Murtada’s family dealt with her and her son - “people were not kind to Adam, “blaming her”, and “pitying her, that she was miserable.” She then had to hide him in her room away from the curiosity of people (Aboulela 2019, p. 26). At the same time Murtada is not able to stay in Britain because, as a foreigner, he cannot get work. He states this when he says to Moni:

“It’s that easy, is it? And even if I do get a job as I had before, why live where I’m not wanted? Here I come and go as I like without ever having to justify myself. On Fridays wear jellabiya and saunter to the mosque in my slippers. There is no pressure to prove anything. I do my work and get paid, no nonsense” (Aboulela 2019, p. 26).

From the previous example, Aboulela, through Murtada, reflects the problem of discrimination in the West in general and prejudice against Arabs and Muslims in specific. Stressing that Arabs or Muslims are discriminated against because of how and what they wear, Murtada asks Moni, “Where’s your pride, Moni? You’re not wanted in Britain. People see you as a leech benefiting from the free health system” (Aboulela 2019, p. 26).

Murtada discusses the problems that Arabs and Muslims face and are exposed to in the West including Islamophobia, discrimination, unemployment, and raising children in non-Muslim communities. In general, as Ismael and Ismael (2010) state, Arabs and Muslims are not afforded the same rights and general feeling of well-being as Westerners are (p. 197). They are still asking to be recognized and respected as any other Western citizen (Idriss and Abbas 2011, p. 21). Likewise, Santesso (2017) adds that discrimination and prejudice against Arabs and Muslims arises out of what Westerners think they know about them and stereotype them as, especially after 9/11 and 7/7. Added to that, the history of the misrepresentation of Arabs and Muslims cannot be ignored (p. 9). Although, as mentioned in the introduction, many authors and scholars have tried to work on how they can transform and render the true image of Arabs to the West and, indeed, the whole world, yet the views about Arabs are still continuously distorted (Gana 2008, p. 19).

Moni, on the other hand, is aware of how the Arab world views disabled people, and how her son may not get access to the same treatment and support facilities that are found in Britain (or any other Western country for that matter). This is why she wants to stay in Britain. This can be seen when she explains to Murtada that there will be nothing for Adam in Saudi Arabia, and certainly no massage and cognitive therapy for him (Aboulela 2019, p. 25). Moni imagines herself in Saudi Arabia facing problems “ranging from lack of wheelchair access” and not being “able to take Adam with her” anywhere (Aboulela 2019, p. 27).

She is always wishing for a miracle to happen - to see Adam on his feet, walking. She totally believes that his “illness was a test of her faith, but sometimes she indulged in fantasies” (Aboulela 2019, p. 32). This is why she gets attached to a young boy after she finds out that his name is Adam. She knows him from a time in the woods before they went to the grave and deals with him as if he is her son, always waiting for him and watching his every move (Aboulela 2019, p.96).

Finally, there is Iman, the third protagonist. Aboulela presents Iman as a dependent Arab woman, different from Salma and Moni in that she feels that she is not able to lead or to be independent. This can be seen in how she responds by giving advice to her two friends. For example, Iman tells Moni that she needs to obey her husband, Moni answers her: “‘Obedience’ was not a blind imperative; it was an acknowledgement of leadership, but still leadership could be challenged and interrogated” (32). This is because all of Iman’s husbands (she has been married three times) have been possessive, something with which she has no problem (Aboulela 2019, p. 13). Having “known a wide spectrum of poverty”, her marriage to three husbands is due in part to her situation as an Arab in the West with no job, no money and no support. Furthermore, she is not alone in her dependence - her family also depends on her. In fact, she hopes to either bring her mother to Britain from Syria or at the very least, send her money (Aboulela 2019, p. 9, 31 & 45).

Iman first marries at the age of fifteen when she comes home after school and is told that she is engaged. A year later, her husband dies. The second husband brings her to Britain and dumps her, eventually ending up in jail; however, when she finds out he is in jail, she makes him divorce her. Her third husband is a student named Ibrahim who promises to unite her with her mother. However, he ends up divorces her after his family discovers their son is married. They force him to divorce her or they will stop sending him money (Aboulela 2019, pp. 34, 49-50).

Another problem Iman faces living in the West is that she lacks the ability to use the English language, making her life even harder. She is not able to integrate with the people there which only makes her become even more dependent, first on her husbands, and now on Salma. As an example, she says that her “tongue betrayed her. She answered them in a language they didn’t understand” when she tries to communicate with the people in the woods (Aboulela 2019, p. 145).

Her inability to cope in the West, especially after she gets divorced from her last husband, leads her to imagining her life without someone to support her and her family in Syria. As a result, she begins first to dressing up in costumes, first as Cinderella, then as Cleopatra, Padme Amidala, the White Witch and other costumes of warrior figures (Aboulela 2019, p. 176). It is as if she wants to change her identity because of not being wanted or accepted in the West. In those feelings, she is a somewhat like Murtada; however, the difference is that she cannot go back to Syria because of the poverty and war there. So the “choice was either to wear these new costumes or her own clothes” (Aboulela 2019, p.176). In the end, all of this led her to stop wearing her hijab, saying that the “hijab wasn’t forced on me against my will, but I wasn’t given a choice to wear it or not, either (Aboulela 2019, p.176).

Iman, much like any other Arab woman who lives in the West, is exposed to conflicts or struggles. These can be both inner struggles and outer ones. The inner struggles within her is not being able to accept her new life and her new and totally different surroundings. In reality, however, she is the one who is different, which is the reason for her outer conflict or struggle. According to Bouregbi (2021), Aboulela’s novels mainly represent female characters who are concerned with two cultures and two different geographies or spaces where they struggle to maintain their real identity and cope with their new life (p. 16).

From what is stated above, one can easily see the problems the three main characters face and how they all suffer from one main problem - none of them are seemingly able to cope with their new lives in the West. Their suffering can also be seen in a little game Salma decides to play where they have to answer the question “If you are allowed to choose one sin that you would totally get away with, what would that sin be?” Iman says that she wants to be alone, “not to be accountable to others”. Moni, on the other hand, wants to kill someone and more than one, while Salam says she wants to steal “what was once mine and then got taken away from me” - the same as Amir wants (Aboulela 2019, pp. 28-29).

Transformation and Metamorphosis

The first character to metamorphose is Moni. Salma tells Moni that she is not a good wife since she puts her son’s needs over her needs and her husband’s needs (Aboulela 2019, p. 180). Moni finds her safety with the other Adam, as if he reminds her of her own son Adam. She meets with him one last time and serves him cookies. She first starts to get wider, fatter and taller then becomes even huger with the same features of a child. She then finds herself rolling around like a ball and “tumbling and somersaulting”. She is, in fact, a ball in the hands of Adam. At last, he drops her, “but all perspectives had shifted” (Aboulela 2019, pp. 217-220). She is described as “a human body squashed into a ball, rolling and unable to straighten up” (Aboulela 2019, p. 233).

Next, the reader is introduced to the metamorphosis of Iman, who transforms to an “unidentified creature, a mix of mammal and reptile, horrific and yet beautiful, a repulsive and yet compelling because of the sad dignity with which it carried itself” (Aboulela 2019, p. 221). She is a human in an animal’s body, her “human shape itself had been a costume, like the princess ball gown she had found in the cupboard, like the warrior trouser”, but this does not stop her from wondering what she looks like (Aboulela 2019, p. 233).

Before Salma transforms, Iman tries to attract Salma’s attention to the fact that she is cheating on her husband, even if she and Amir only contact each other using messages and phone calls (Aboulela 2019, p. 180). Salma sees Amir and follows him to his room, where he lies with fever. Then she appears in his clinic and walks into his arms. She then lays “flat on her back on the operating table”. She discovers that she is not able to move her arms nor her legs and that all her strength has gone. She tells the other girls that, “He took my strength instead of my virtue.” In other words, “He dug inside and took my muscles” (Aboulela 2019, pp. 241 – 246). They meet together and discover that Salma has become a “doormat”, Moni a “Swiss ball” and Iman “inhuman and unable to speak” (Aboulela 2019, p. 246).

From the previous paragraphs, notice that the characters’ transformations are indicated before. Moni was with Adam, Iman takes off her hijab and Salma is confronted by Iman who says she is cheating on her husband with Amir. The transformation is followed by the advice of the Hoopoe bird. Iman is advised to “dress like you’ve always dressed”, Moni to “care for your son as well as your husband. Teach your husband to care for his son” and Salma “to stop phoning Amir” (Aboulela 2019, p. 186).

After Transformation

The transformation or the metamorphosis is only a stage that the characters go through in order to reach a point where their issues they have been exposed to in the past have been solved. During this stage, they reach a point where they have reconstructed their new identities as being Arab Westerners. They are now able to comprehend the fact that they no longer belong to one geographical place or to one culture. Instead they belong to two different and detached places and to two totally different cultures. This not just happens physically, but also spiritually and mentally. This is stated in the following quote: “We must return... A physical return. Their bodies back to how they had been before, able to stand tall, to bend when they wanted to bend, to move with ease.... A return to dignity, to humanity and strength”. Nevertheless, , they still have not reached the “spiritual return” (Aboulela 2019, p. 247). Their physical return happened when “Iman became human again. Moni unfurled and straightened. Strength coursed through Salma’s body” (Aboulela 2019, p. 260).

Describing their spiritual return and starting with Iman, she “had grown up. She wore maturity like a cape and it was the best piece of clothing she had ever put on” (Aboulela 2019, p. 261). At this stage, Iman is different. She is described as having grown up and this does

not mean in age; instead, she has matured without being dependent. She has grown in a way to accept her new personality as a woman living in a new and different place. She eventually reaches a point where she goes back to wearing her hijab, believing that changing the place and culture does not mean to be stripped of beliefs and values. She does this after developing her awareness of accepting her identity as an Arab.

On the same path, Moni's spiritual return starts with accepting herself and accepting her disabled child. She starts "to look around her, to see all that was beautiful and fascinating. To step away from herself and her problems. To be more than a mother of a disabled child, more than a full time career." She starts to think of Adam as having to be "carried with firmness and ease" rather than as "a burden" or a kind of "sacrifice". She decides to think of him as different in a special way and thinks of having a brother or a sister for Adam (Aboulela 2019, p. 261). From what has been stated, one can see how Moni's perspective towards her life and son changes and differs. She no longer thinks of how taking care of Adam is something tiring, and no longer thinks of not having other babies because she is afraid that they will be born with the same symptoms as Adam. She moves away from being trapped by the disability of her son and from that being the reason for hating her own life.

Salma soon realizes that she was willing to leave everything behind her back before just because Amir called her "doctor", and like Iman and Moni, also spiritually returns with significant changes. She realizes that she has not been fair to herself and that she has been "putting herself down". She also reaches a point, where she accepts herself without showing her "low self-esteem beneath the efficiency", and a point where she accepts her children as they are without trying to force them into doing what she was not able to do (Aboulela 2019, p. 263). Salma accepts herself as an Arab wife of a British husband and a mother of British children. She is now free from Amir and her illusions to her life with him and how it could have been. She also reaches to a point, where she accepts that she is a great therapist, even if she has not fulfilled her ambitions of being a doctor.

From how the three characters go through the transformation or the metamorphosis, it is clear that they have really transformed. What changes are personalities of the characters their perspectives towards their lives. They start looking at their issues in a different way. They no longer consider themselves mired in these issues of being Arabs living in the West. They reach a point where they reconstruct their new hybrid identity as Arab-Westerners rather than just hiding beneath the fact of being different Arabs. Bhabha (1994) refers to this as the "Third Space" (p. 23) where these Arabs reach their new identities as Arab Westerners and, thus new lives for themselves where they mix between the two cultures. In other words, according to Bhabha (1994), these Arabs mix "a sense of home", instead of sticking and holding on to it, with "a space to which they belong" (p. 23). They reach a stage, where they challenge their new life and their holding to their previous life in order for the "disparate cultures" to "meet, clash and grapple with each other" (Pratt 1992, p. 6). This Third Space is where they have reached rational solutions.

5. Conclusion

Through analyzing Leila Aboulela's novel *Bird Summons* (2019) both through the lens of postcolonialism and through consulting studies from the literature review, the study concludes with Aboulela's use of Kafka's metamorphosis in her novel *Bird Summons* (2019). This is used by Aboulela to show how her three main protagonists reconstruct their identities, as Arab Westerners. She shows how they transform into different shapes and creatures because of the problems they are exposed to in the West as Arabs until finally reaching a stage where they have overcome their issues and adopted their new identities as Arab Westerners are able to comfortably and happily live in the West.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Middle East University in Amman, Jordan, for their financial support granted to cover the publication fees of this research article.

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