A Poetics of Chaos: Spatial Metaphors in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* and *Minaret*

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Abstract

While contemporary culture seems to valorize unbounded mobility as the cornerstone of a transnational and borderless world, both social and individual experience continue to be dominated by the impulse for borders and restrictions. Leila Aboulela explores this discrepancy by interrogating the spatial organization of social reality both to show the prevalence of border logic and to suggest pathways for resurgence. This paper examines how the deployment of spatial tropes in Aboulela's early novels *The Translator* (1999) and *Minaret* (2006) is aimed at demonstrating that conceptions of space as orderly and static often serve to maintain certain power configurations. At the same time, these tropes counter the discursive drive for order by tapping into the potential for resistance that inhabits these hegemonic narratives of space. I argue that by mobilizing such tropes as border-crossing, journeying, and carnivalesque chaos, the texts in question advocate a more fluid and chaotic notion of space.

Keywords: Leila Aboulela, Anglophone Arab fiction, space studies, chaos, The Translator, Minaret, politics

1. Introduction

The spatial determination of contemporary culture has a particular significance for Anglophone Arab fiction, a tradition that often finds itself inevitably caught up in what Edward Said (1994:6) famously called "the struggle over geography". As a postcolonial subgenre that proposes to engage with the effects of the European conquest of space as well as the themes of migration and interaction between individuals and groups in cross-cultural contexts, Anglophone Arab fiction is often concerned with the political project of showing the ways in which the category of space is intrinsic to questions of identity and power relationships. Along with the task of providing a cartography of spatial politics and how they permeate contemporary social reality, this tradition has also been engaged in various forms of resistance that are aimed at destabilizing totalizing conceptions of space, and this by foregrounding an alternative model of spatiality that is predicated upon the notions of contingency, plurality, and fluidity.

British-Sudanese novelist Leila Aboulela, who has been a central figure in this literary tradition, exemplifies Anglophone Arab writers' preoccupation with the tendency to treat space as static and inert, and therefore capable of being ordered and controlled. In her two major novels *The Translator* (1999) and *Minaret* (2006), Aboulela presents us with migration narratives in which marginalized migrant characters negotiate space at the intersection of race and politics. In so doing, Aboulela articulates both the prevalence of neocolonial spatial configurations, as well as the possibilities of resistance that reside in, and continuously erode, hegemonic definitions of space. This strategy resonates with Walton & Suárez's (2016) recent tripartite spatial model of social order which includes borders, networks, and escape lines. For Walton & Suárez, borders suggest the authoritarian thrust of neo-colonial discursive delineations of space which rest on a dual logic and find their clearest expression in the desire for partitions and divisions. Yet, these partitions and barriers are traversed by elements of connection and circulation, what the authors call 'networks', which complicate the well-ordered duality of borders. In addition to these layers, 'escape lines' or resistance pathways exist to provide the possibility of breaking out of these sealed partitions. I argue that both the prevalence of border logic and the existence of resistance trajectories are suggested in *The Translator* and *Minaret*. The novels in question appear to point to the ways which space is now embedded in various structures of oppression and power differentials. At the same time, they question the myths that underlie these spatial configurations and gesture towards an alternative model of spatiality.

Andrew H. Armstrong (2018: 224) explains that the archetypal migrant journey often involves the spatial processes of 'travel' and 'dwelling'. I argue that these two processes animate the narratives of *The Translator* and *Minaret*, respectively, where they transmute into tropes of resistance. And while these tropes differ, they could nevertheless be described as being linked to one master trope – that of chaos, which seems to operate as a response to the homogenizing and exclusionary impulses that reside in contemporary appropriations of space. Michel De Certeau (1984: 124) has shown that a major consequence of viewing space as 'place' – that is to say as physical locations – is to suggest an 'immobile order' in which elements are distributed in a stable configuration, as opposed to the concept of 'space' which implies a set of mobile elements that move in diverse, unpredictable, and sometimes even 'conflictual' directions. To assert the abstraction of space, therefore, Aboulela proceeds to demystify the myth of order and stability by emphasizing the operations of chaotic and unruly forces that show the constructed nature of space and thus transform 'place' into 'space'.

The deployment of what might be termed a poetics of chaos in a postcolonial context is not surprising given the fact that the chaotic model is aligned with the postcolonial project of contesting linear explanations and narratives. Chaos theory argues against the tendency to explain "the world in elegant, linear, reassuring equations" (Oboe 2013: 8) thus allowing complexity, unpredictability, and uncertainty to arise as a substitute for the absolute claims of scientific discourse. It is this emphasis within the chaotic model on non-linear, relational dynamics and the distrust of dualism and dichotomies (Hayes 1991) that is particularly appealing to a postcolonial perspective, particularly one with an eye to the spatial underpinnings of a wide range of grand narratives. In this regard, the liberation of chaos can be seen as a method that sanctions both the dismantling of binaries and the negotiation of alternative power relationships. This disruptive process is present in *The Translator* and *Minaret*, where the unpredictability of chaos destabilizes spatially-conceived hierarchies and gestures toward alternative socio-political structures.

In *The Translator*, the rigidity of border logic is suggested in the concern with maps, borders and architecture. The novel repeatedly evokes the impulse for order that was common in turn-of-the-millennium western societies and was translated in architectural terms in the creation of neat, immaculate cities and well-ordered edifices. In socio-political terms, this compulsion for order found expression in the construction cultural barriers between white Europeans and various minority groups in the West, including the Muslim migrant community which is the focus of the novel. The 1990s could be described as a turbulent decade for Muslims in the West. In addition to outbreak of the Gulf War, the period also saw the appearance of Samuel Huntington's concept of a "Clash of Civilizations", and the ascendency across Europe of a binary discourse that sought to entrench the view of Muslims as the 'outsider inside' (Ansari 2018). In Britain, the situation of Muslims was particularly adverse with widespread xenophobia, discriminatory practices, and social exclusion. The novel, accordingly, registers the rise of racial intolerance as it maps the migrant itinerary of its central character across both real and imaginative space. At the same time, the text deconstructs the binary logic inherent to the notion of space as a set of fixed boundaries by reiterating the tropes of mobility, journeying, and border-crossing to emphasize the provisionary nature of spatial structures. In so doing, it destabilizes phantasies of fixity and order through the release of the kind of chaotic energy that is associated with movement and journeying.

In *Minaret*, Aboulela scales down the treatment of space by moving the action from the sprawling limits of the city to the more restricted confines of the domestic space. Interestingly, this rearrangement reveals the same power differentials, as the protagonist finds herself trapped within similar exclusionary dynamics that find inspiration in 19th century representations of the domestic space as space of servile acquiescence. Moreover, Aboulela further disadvantages her character by confining her to the kitchen space – a space traditionally reserved for subordinate subjects. Yet, it will be shown that while this maneuver appears to radically disenfranchise the character, it paradoxically opens up possibilities for empowerment and resistance for her. Once again, this is achieved by destabilizing the rigidity of border logic with its rules and assumptions regarding accepted social norms, and the celebration of a Bakhtininian brand of chaos which utilizes the kind of laughter and role reversal that are often associated with the carnival mode. Thus, from within the confines of the kitchen, the protagonist proceeds to disrupt the seemingly unassailable rigidity of domestic order and create an alternative space in which both agency and resistance become possible.

2. Toward a Borderless World: Border-Crossing/Journey in *The Translator*

Published in 1999, Aboulela's first novel *The Translator* tells the story of a young Muslim Sudanese woman named Samar, who grew up in Scotland, went back to Sudan when she was seven, and returned to settle in Aberdeen, Scotland after marrying her cousin Tarig. Soon after the birth of their son Amir, Tarig dies in a car accident, leaving Samar feeling distraught and lonely. Unable to cope with her loss, she leaves her son in Khartoum and returns to Aberdeen to start a new life working as a translator for a local university. Through this job, Sammar meets Rae, a Middle-Eastern historian, scholar, and lecturer and the two start a friendship that eventually turns into a love relationship. However, their blossoming connection is overshadowed by cultural differences and the anti-Muslim sentiment that reigned in Britain in the wake of the Gulf War of 1990-91. Disillusioned, Samar once again leaves Scotland to settle in Khartoum, but quickly learns that she will not find the kind of closure she expected from being 'home'. As she struggles with dysfunctional family relationships, Rae suddenly shows up at her door, and the novel ends with the couple planning their new life together in Aberdeen.

Concerned as it is with the constant movement across various national and transnational spaces, as well as the dynamics of encounters within a multi-cultural setting, the novel is predictably concerned with the themes of borders and the procedures for regulating entry and exit that characterized the politics of spatial control at the time. Border logic is accordingly present in the text through a polarized rhetoric of dualities. This rhetoric is exemplified by Yasmin, Sammar's British-born Pakistani friend, who "had a habit of making general statements starting with 'we' as opposed to 'them' (Aboulela 1991: 11). Yasmin sees the world in terms of the traditional dichotomy East/West, and keeps stressing the unbridgeable gap between the two: "We are not like them", she often says. "We have close family ties, not like them." (Aboulela 1991: 11). Other characters exhibit a subtler version of this polarized discourse, as is the case with Jennifer, Sammar's boss in the Languages department. We are told that following the outbreak of the Gulf War, "suddenly everyone became aware that Sammar was Muslim" including Jennifer, who "unexpectedly and abruptly, called Sammar" to tell her "I have no problem at all the way you dress" (Aboulela 1991: 99-100). This reaction is suggestive of the rise of anti-muslin sentiment in the West at the time, which echoed a political discourse that sought to divide the world into two opposed factions using the binary rhetoric of either/or, with/against. And despite the fact that the novel is not particularly explicit about this climate of tension and intolerance, the latter effectively provides the backdrop against which most of the important events of the story take place. This includes the bumpy evolution of Sammar's and Rae's relationship, as well as the latter becoming increasingly the subject of disparagement due to his unorthodox views regarding the

relationship between the West and the Middle East.

In physical, spatial terms, this border logic can be seen in the immaculate architecture of the city, a feature that seems to take Sammar by surprise: "it took [her] time to take in the perfect neatness of the buildings and the gleaming road" (Aboulela 1991: 21).Yet, as Smith & Walters (2018) remind us, "[t]he construction of space in the city is not a neutral act; it is brought into being by urban planners, shaped by the considerations of capital alongside other social agents". In this case, the city's neat design conveys a sense of order and containment which is nowhere more visible than in the Foresterhill medical complex. Located at the heart of Aberdeen, and "interspersed by roads, cars and buses, car parks, bus stops, gardens and a children's playground" (Aboulela 1991: 79), this monumental structure is a city in miniature. The sheer expanse of the hospital power is illustrated in Sammar's case by the fact that all the major events of her life in Aberdeen unfolded within its premises: "There was the Medical School where Tarig had trained and sat exams, there was the Matternity Hospital where Sammar had Amir. There was Casualty where Tarig had died on a sunny day and she had sat waiting for someone to come from the mosque" (Aboulela 1991: 79).

The desire for order and containment is also manifested in the urge to attach names and labels to things. Early in the novel, Sammar marvels at the fact that "[i]n this country everything was labelled, everything had a name" (Aboulela 1991: 4). This attribute is particularly significant with regard to the urban experience, with the city providing a striking example of architectural and semiotic symmetry. The narrative is accordingly concerned with conveying the urban experience by paying close attention to the names of streets and locations. Thus, from "tree-lined street" (14) near where Rae lived, to the 'bright', lively Union Street (21) and the seemingly endless buildings of the Foresterhill medical complex, the architectural features of the city persistently take center stage in the narrative. Eric Bulson (2007: 17) has emphasized the centrality of "[s]treet signs, place names, and other orientational landmarks" to the modern novel. The latter, he argues, "have played a crucial role in the production of reality for centuries. They identify a location out there in the world and can often produce the comforting effect that every street, building and signpost is just where it should be" (17-18). To be sure, Sammar's experience of immaculate geography of the city does have this comforting effect, as is often shown in her frequent walks through the city: "Sammar walked to work through familiar streets. She knew where the road changed from asphalt to cobbles. Even certain people's faces had become familiar over time. Years ago, these same streets were a maze of culture shocks (Aboulela 1991: 70). However, as the latter part of Bulson's quote suggests, architectural neatness is also a reminder that everything 'is just where it should be', which means that space has been shaped to create what Bulson (2007:18) calls 'cartographic abstraction' – an order which ostensibly seeks to provide guidance and orientation but, in reality, and by virtue of controlling movement, ends up producing disorientation and alienation.

To counter this rigid border logic, the text proceeds to disrupt a set of false assumptions that underlie conceptions of space as well-ordered and structured. For instance, the notion of stability suggested by borders is undercut by the recurrent deployment of the travel theme. In fact, travel is celebrated in the text as an antidote to the hegemony of border logic, and is suggested by the tropes of border-crossing and the journey motif. Sarah Upstone (2009: 57) has shown that the journey motif is often used in postcolonial fiction as indication of what she calls a "transnational and unbordered engagement with space". In this regard, the journey motif challenges dominant constructions of space as fixed and points instead to the fluctuating nature of spatial configurations. In *The Translator*, the journey motif can be seen in the fact that the main characters are always changing locations. Moreover, this constant change of locations can be described as chaotic since it occurs in unpredictable directions. For instance, the conventional narrative of migration to the global North is reversed by Sammar when she leaves Aberdeen to go settle (albeit temporally) in Khartoum. Rae, too, has gone to a number of countries in the Middle East and toward the end of the novel we find him in Khartoum looking to make things right with Sammar. The narrative is punctuated with the names of diverse locations, shifting cultures, and travel arrangements, creating the impression of relentless movement.

The journey motif is also suggested in the centrality of travel-related locations such as train stations and airports terminals. These locations often receive a great deal of attention given the fact that most characters in the story are constantly on the move. In fact, even when extreme weather conditions make it almost impossible to travel, we find Sammar and Rae discussing alternative travel arrangements:

> 'The roads are really bad.'
>
> 'It's good Nazim isn't off-shore,' Yasmin said. 'You're lucky you're going away. It's tomorrow, isn't it?
>
> 'If the trains run. They cancelled them today.' Sammar stamped her feet to shake off the snow that was on her shoes.
>
> 'The airport is open. They've cleared the runway. You can get a plane to London if the trains aren't running.' (Aboulela 1991: 121)

The word 'airport' is one of the most recurring words in the novel, and seems to have great significance to Sammar long before she left Sudan to go to Scotland. We are told, for instance, that one of her most vivid childhood memories of Khartoum is that of Tarig "rid[in] his bicycle through the puddles on purpose, every puddle from here to Airport Road" (Aboulela 1991: 158). We later learn that she would actually accompany Tariq in his daily rides along the Airport Road, paving the way for the romantic connection that would later develop between the two. Therefore, whenever she thinks of home, she finds herself nostalgically drawn to this image of the airport as the unconscious destination of their walks: "To see again the streets where Tarig had ridden his bike, and she had walked every day after school to him and Hanan, walking towards the airport, with her back to where the sun would later set" (Aboulela 1991: 33). The centrality of the airport image will later be emphasized again when Sammar is back in Sudan after spending several years in Aberdeen. In describing

one of Khartoum's recurrent power cuts, Sammar tellingly reveals that "all the neighbouring houses and roads were in darkness, proof of a major power cut and not a fault in the building. Only far away shone the lights of the airport, yellow and red" (Aboulela 1991: 146).

The description of the airport as standing out with its lights in the dark background seems to be tied to its symbolism as a space of movement and life. "Flying", writes Rodrigo Fresán in a foreword to Erica Durante's book on air travel and airports (Durante 2020: vii), "is like being […] more alive than ever". This explains why every time she is at an airport, Sammar is overwhelmed by the sheer energy and diversity that she sees all around her. Consider, for instance, this passage which describes Sammar at Aberdeen Airport as she waits to board a flight to London:

> It was a plush, clean airport, crowded today with oil-men on their way to Shetland, women with small children, men in business-suits. Sammar's eyes missed nothing. She could see everything, register everything. Her mind would not think, would not dwell or settle on anything. Just her vision, so much to look at, everything gritty bright. (Aboulela 1991: 131)

The airport seems to be a space that condenses life at large, a microcosm of what is happening outside. Moreover, what seems to give the airport this life-like quality is precisely the constant state of movement that is inherent to it. In another rendition of the aforementioned airport scene, the narrative echoes the same link between movement and life as it reveals the association in Sammar's mind between travelling and feeling: "She sat on a green seat reading the information on the screen, Arrivals, Departures, reading it again and again. Feeling the sun outside the window wane" (Aboulela 1991: 132).

The notion of the sun as representing dynamic life forces will be taken up again, as the text continues to push the limits of the border-crossing trope in an attempt to deconstruct border logic. This time, however, the focus is on destabilizing rigid *geographical* borders with their assumptions of fixity and constancy. There is a lengthy passage which describes the "orderly city" of Abderdeen (119) as it receives a "rare visitor" called "chaos" (119). Chaos, in this case, is created by exceedingly heavy snow that renders the city's operational infrastructure almost useless. As the inhabitant of the city struggle to cope with this anarchical situation, the sun unexpectedly starts to shine

> brighter than ever, dazzling on the white that covered the surface of things. There was sunshine like in Africa and the city slowed down, became inefficient, as if it were part of the Third World. From this came Sammar's strength. […] The streets were long queues of cars, awkward buses and vans. The pavements were trampled snow and patches of slippery ice. It was useless to catch a bus. The buses were elephants today. (Aboulela 1991: 119)

The triumphant note in Sammar's throughts ("From this came Sammar's strength") is significant because it indicates a preference for "this chaos" over the "tense and stubborn […] daily rhythm" of the city (Aboulela 1991: 119). The new chaotic space that emerges is one in which territories that are customarily thought of in antithetical terms – in this case Africa and Europe – are now overlapping, as snow is replaced with sun and buses with elephants. This imaginative rewriting of spaces and borders, as Alessandra Rizzo (2014) notes, is aimed at showing that they are "not […] fixed and stable notions, but variable concepts that are liable to change". Also, by 'transposing' one territorialized culture into another, Aboulela creates a transcultural space, or as French Anthroplogist Marc Augé (1995: 34) would have it, a 'non-place' that defies "the idea of a culture localized in time and space".

The blurring of the spatial boundaries between Africa and Europe to denote the fluid and complex nature of space occurs in another passage in which Sammar resorts to hallucinatory pathways in her attempt to break off contact with reality and renegotiate borders. The passage in question is situated in the opening section of the novel, as Sammar steps outside Rae's home following a short but pleasant visit to her convalescing host:

> 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 pot-holes. A bicycle bell tinkled, frogs croaked, the muezzin coughed into the microphone and began the azan for the *Isha* prayer. But this was Scotland and the reality left her dulled, unsure of herself. (Aboulela 1991: 20-21, author's emphasis)

This passage is one of several instances in which Aboulela toys with 'objective' international borders in order to emphasize the contingency that underlies geo-political spatial configurations. Elsewhere, the constructed and subjective nature of place is evoked through a process of continuous alteration. For instance, recurrent references are made to Sammar's room in Aberdeen following her husband's death. Sammar, we learn, "lived in a room with nothing on the wall, nothing personal, no photographs, no books; just like a hospital room" (Aboulela 1991: 15). The 'hospital' room was so much a reflection of Sammar's own life at that point that she "said to herself, 'I am not like this. I am better than this." (Aboulela 1991: 67). Interestingly, after she meets Rae and becomes romantically attached to him, her room is suddenly transformed into a different type of place: it "was now no longer a hospital room with the coloured plastic bags and packaging scattered on the floor, her new scarves laid out on the bed" (Aboulela 1991: 69). Moreover, this process of alteration is not restricted to Sammar's room, but is also applied to the city at large. Shortly before Sammar leaves Abberdeen for Sudan, the city is described as having a stifling effect on the anxiety-ridden protagonist, who "[m]ore than anything else, wanted now to leave the university, the prison of its familiar buildings, its familiar routine. She wanted to leave Aberdeen, get away from where she had been ill and sleepy for so long" (Aboulela 1991: 113). Once in Sudan, however, Sammar's loathing of the city is remarkably replaced by longing

and nostalgia: "[s]he wanted a bed and a cover, sleep. She wanted to sleep like she used to sleep in Aberdeen, everything muffled up and grey, curling up, covering her face with the blanket, her breath warming the cocoon she had made for herself" (Aboulela 1991: 171).

The above quote, with its suggestion of the provisionary nature of places, also has implications regarding the related concepts of home and belonging, which lie at the center of the novel's preoccupations. Part two of the book begins with an epigraph from Tayab Salah's classic novel *Season of Migration to the North* (1969) that ends as follows: "I felt not like a storm-swept feather but like that palm tree, a being with a background, with roots . . ." (Aboulela 1991: 133). The image of the palm tree with roots, together with the fact that this part of the narrative covers Sammar's return to Sudan, suggests a certain closure with regard to Sammar's earlier 'alienation' in Scotland. It would seem that, now that she is back in her 'homeland', Sammar is finally going to experience a hitherto elusive sense of identity and belonging, and find anchoring for her rootless self. Yet, as she has done with other spatially conceived categories, Aboulela proceeds to problematize the concepts of home and belonging. She does so by divesting space of any nativist or cultural elements and therefore transforming it into what Alessandra Rizzo (2014), citing Marc Augé, calls "cultural non-location" – a space where diversity and contraction are allowed to arise.

Early in the novel, the exiled and nostalgic Sammar naively associates the concept of home with Sudan. In the middle of her hectic life in Aberdeen, she sometimes enters into reveries similar to the one mentioned earlier where "[h]ome had come here" (Aboulela 1991: 20) and she can almost relive "the power cuts at home or she would mistake the gurgle of the central-heating pipes for a distant azan" (Aboulela 1991: 21). To be at 'home' is to be "among people she had known all her life" (Aboulela 1991: 35) and for this reason, she looks at the time spent away from Sudan as time wasted: "She had lived four years as if home had been taken away from her in the same way Tarig had. To see home again. It was a chandelier on the ceiling of her life, circles of lights" Aboulela (1991: 33).

It should be noted, however, that these nostalgic moments are almost invariably connected to the stage in Sammar's life in which she was struggling to cope with the tragic loss of her husband and the painful separation from her son. These personal tragedies will push Sammar to develop a detached attitude toward her environment which in turn will increase her alienation. Ghadir K. Zannoun (2019) argues that Sammar's refusal to participate in communal activities in Aberdeen has resulted in a failure "to territorialize her place so that she can experience 'daily belonging'". Yet, as Zannoun observes, this alienation is not so much "intrinsic to her [Sammar's] constitution or to the place's", as much as it is a consequence of the protagonist's inability to engage in daily interaction with the people around her due to the emotional ordeal she is going through.

3. From Domestic Intimacy to Chaotic Transgression: Carnivalesque Resistance in *Minaret*

Minaret (2005), Aboulela's second novel tells the story of Najwa, a young Sudanese woman who is forced to leave her country after a coup and flee to England. In London, Najwa's situation deteriorates as she struggles to cope with the challenges of migrant life, especially after her mother dies and her younger brother goes to prison. Najwa's alienation is alleviated when she accidentally joins a Muslim community based in Regent's Park and, through this community, she finds employment as a servant and nanny for a wealthy Arab family of Sudanese-Egyptian origins. However, Najwa's hope that the cultural connection with this family will create the ideal conditions for a satisfying work experience is shattered by her overbearing employer Doctora Zainab and her cold, unsympathetic daughter Lamia. The two take turns to remind Najwa that she is inferior both in education and social background. Najwa's alienation increases as she finds herself predominantly confined to the kitchen space, which becomes a symbol of her migrant marginalization and exploitation. Unexpectedly, however, the kindness of Doctora Zainab's youthful son Tamer and a germinating spiritual reawakening allow Najwa to negotiate power and identity by transforming the kitchen space from an arena of domestication exploitation (Floyd 2004) to a space of agency and empowerment.

Marta Cariello (2009) has pointed to the centrality of the themes of movement and space to *Minaret*. Just like Samar's, Najwa's story could be described as a relentless movement in space. Her journey includes the movement from the national space of meaning and stability to the cross-cultural space of liminality and alienation. Yet, while movement and travel are central to the *Minaret*, they do not seem to carry the same significance as in *The Translator*. In the latter novel, we have seen that movement and travel are celebrated as a part of a discursive insurgence with regard to dominant ideologies of space that are based on border logic. In *Minaret*, however, travel is important in so far as it represents a spatial process that leads to settling in a particular location. 'Dwelling', therefore, is the primary trope in *Minaret*, which explains why the narrative is focused on a set of micro-locations within the city. For these micro-locations to move to the foreground Aboulela, to use Upstone's (2009) terms, decided to 'reduce the scale' of representation that she has employed in *The Translator* so that the stage where the narrative unfolds is no longer the metropolitan city at large, but the more intimate space of several urban locations. These locations include, among others, the Mosque where Najwa meets and interacts with other Muslim migrants in the city and, perhaps more importantly, the house where works as a maid and to which she is confined throughout most of the narrative.

Moreover, the significance of domestic space in Najwa's case extends beyond the fact of being a workplace to operate as an emblem of her dramatic change of fortune, from the life of ease and extravagance that she lived in her native Sudan to the hardships and struggles of her migrant life in London. It is no coincidence that back in Sudan, Najwa's life was centered on events that took place outdoors, in such public places as schools, pools, fundraisers, and discos, whereas her life as a migrant is mostly defined by her experiences within her employer's household. As such, within the context of a spatially distributed power structure, the 'home' would seem to function as a symbol of Najwa's decline and subordination. This association between the home and subordination, as Upstone (2009) notes, is tied to the discursive practice of using of the home as a construct that reaffirms colonial values which, in turn, finds inspiration in the 19th

century notion of idealized domesticity. The colonial paradigm utilized order in the management of its colonies, and therefore, "orderly, clean and well-kept dwellings" were the cornerstone of [its] representation (Upstone 2009: 137). In addition, the colonial system relied on border logic to maintain existing power relations between center and periphery which, as Anne McClintock (1995:168) explains, accounts for the way in which the "domestic space [is] mapped as a hierarchy of specialized and distinct boundaries". Both notions of order and boundaries are salient features of the representation of the domestic space in *Minaret*, where they become the object of carnivalesque reversal.

The text's concern with boundaries can be seen in the way the household space is hierarchically divided, with the family members occupying the majority of space and Najwa being confined to the kitchen space. As Bridget Anderson (2000:14) explains, "the organization of our homes and their accoutrements demonstrates our position within wider social relations". In the novel, this separation reflects the power differential between Najwa and her employers, since the kitchen is traditionally "the space where the raw, the unclean and the defiled are brought, and where the social rules attendant on civilized life are reiterated, where status is confirmed and exclusion practiced" (Janet Floyd 2004). On her fist day at work, Najwa strives to show her employer that she knows how "deferential a maid should be" (Aboulela 2006: 42). As she is given a tour of the house by Lamya, she notices how 'spacious' and bright the living room is but quickly reminds herself that she "should try and stop [her] eyes from wondering too much" (Aboulela 2006: 42). She, therefore, tries "to take in as much of the room as possible as [she] can with lowered eyes" (42). Implied in this account is both the obsequious nature of Najwa's attitude as well as her latent potential for insurgence, as expressed in her secretive but defiant gaze. Unlike the large, bright living room, the kitchen is "slightly dark, with a large rectangular table in the middle, cluttered with Mai's high chair" (Aboulela 2006: 43). This is where Najwa spends most her time: "[w]hen she [Lamya] leaves to go to university, I spend a long time in the kitchen, washing the dishes, tidying up and tackling the ironing. Doctora Zeinab and Mai remain the sitting room [...]" (Aboulela 2006:43). The spatial separation is also evident in the part of the story that describes Lamya's party, where the lively and boisterous atmosphere of the party is contrasted to the quiet, solitary space of the kitchen: "in the kitchen", says Najwa, "I can still make out the songs [...] it's a bubbling shallow excitement" (Aboulela 2006: 136).

In fact, one of Najwa's most rebellious actions, which takes the form of a breach of this spatial organization, will occur during the aforementioned party. Najwa is obviously not allowed to attend the party except to "pick up the empty glasses and return them to the kitchen" (Aboulela 2006: 136), but as she catches sight of a veiled girl who surprisingly performs what looks like a strip dance, she is too incredulous to continue to observe the unspoken rules of spatial access. She decides to go to Tamer's room and recount this bizarre occurrence, and the passage that relates this incident suggests the transgressive nature of this decision:

> The lady has finished her tea and gestures for me to take her cup away but I ignore it. To walk down the corridor to his room is to move from yellow gaiety to mellowness, calm and cool like the first moments of sleep. I push open the door, and he is at his desk, twiddling his hair. (Aboulela 2006: 137)

What happens next is a scene of physical intimacy between Najwa and Tamer in which lines are crossed and rules are broken, and for which Najwa will be mercilessly punished. This particular arrangement of events (entering the forbidden space of the family and committing the 'offence' of seducing the young tamer) suggests that from the perspective of the family, the boundaries within the household have been specifically drawn to prevent similar transgressions from taking place.

Together with the emphasis on boundaries, there is in *Minaret* an equally potent impulse for order. This can be seen in the fact that Doctora Zainab and her daughter Lamya are careful to communicate a sense of uncompromising order, frequently reminding Najwa that the balance of power in the house is tilted in their direction. From the outset, Najwa is struck by the imposing nature of Doctora Zainab, whose 'presence', she tells us, is 'tangible' (Aboulela 2006: 125). As she explains to Najwa her duties, Doctora Zainab lays out a structured order that must be thoroughly respected:

> Back in the kitchen, she announces 'it's time for my coffee […] Now it's time for Mai's nap. I give her juice and take her to the bedroom and she sleeps for about an hour and a half, sometimes two. While she sleeps, you should do the cooking […] also in the afternoon, if the weather is good, you must take her to the park (Aboulela 2006: 44-5).

Additionally, she reminds Najwa that she and her family belong to a different class, and that this social barrier must always be kept: "My children grew up in Oman where we always had maids. They're very spoilt and can't look after themselves" (Aboulela 2006: 54). Lamya's behavior is equally overbearing and, although the narrative is often not quite explicit about her demeanor, there are hints that Najwa has internalized some of her young employer's strict rules. This is the case, for instance, when Tamer casually stretches out on the sofa and Najwa instantly thinks that "Lamya would disapprove of this. She would say that the sofa is for guests to sit on" (Aboulela 2006: 122). Another indication of the kind of the of distance that exists between the two is shown when Lamya suddenly announces that she is having a party. "Perhaps it is her birthday", Najwa ponders. "She doesn't tell me. Instead she says she is going to the hairdresser and lists all the things that I have to do, from filling little dishes with nuts and crisps to borrowing extra chairs from the neighbours" (Aboulela 2006: 134). It becomes clear from this that both mother and daughter are careful to display class superiority vis-à-vis their housemaid, and this by upholding a sense of domestic order that emphasizes strict observance of social roles.

This domestic structure, however, is subtly but steadily contested by an alternative model of 'chaotic domesticity' (Upstone 2009: 137) that transforms the domestic space into a space of liberation and subversion. Matthew Whittle (2016), commenting on the fiction of V.S. Naipaul and Samuel Selvon, argues that the domestic space can act "as a politicized site of racial tension that

[problematizes] the colonialist centre-periphery relations at local levels" (148). This is evident is in *Minaret* with regard to the kitchen space, the space where Najwa is confined both physically and symbolically. Jeremy Morris (2005) has shown that the "kitchen-space [...] can usefully be compared to carnival space, that is: neither private nor specifically oppositional" (20). Similarly, Cariello (2009) notes the ways in which the kitchen in *Minaret* operates "as scene of an intimate negotiation", (349) a possible heterotopia within the asymmetrically empowered domestic space. I will argue that this negotiation is textually achieved through the deployment of the carnival mode. In a much-quoted passage from his classic study *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin (1984: 10) defines the carnival as "a temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order: it marks the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions…[carnival] was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed". This contestatory mode is observable in connection to the kitchen space in the novel, which is described in terms that unambiguously evoke chaos and volatility: "Every day I face a mess in the kitchen", says Najwa, "and a considerable part of my day is spent cleaning up the kitchen from the misuse of the night before" (Aboulela 2006: 62). The fact that the disruption of domestic order is specifically located in the kitchen is an indication of the subversive potential of this space. On several occasions, Najwa's characteristically diffident narration suggests the singularity of the kitchen within the domestic space of her employer's home. In contrast to the exceedingly cold and unsympathetic ambiance that reins in this home, for instance, Najwa tells us that that "the kitchen is warm" (Aboulela 2006: 74), which makes for more cordial human interaction. This can be seen particularly in the unlikely bond that is forged between Najwa and Tamer, Doctora Zainab's son. Interestingly, it is the kitchen that gradually becomes the site of their developing affinity as they find themselves continuously drawn to this space:

> I make lentil soup and the peanut salad I promised Tamer. He wakes up at noon, looking better and says he's hungry. I set the kitchen table for him, heat up pita bread. He slurps the soup while I iron, blows his nose into a tissue […] He eats with a good appetite, tearing larges pieces of bread, scooping up the peanut sauce that is chunky with onions and green peppers. It amuses me that he can eat well even when he is sick (Aboulela 2006: 74).

What is noteworthy in this scene is that Najwa is no longer cast in the role of a servant but transforms instead into the composite figure of the mother/wife tending to the ailing Tamer. This crossing of social boundaries undercuts the home's strict distribution of roles, allowing Najwa a temporary respite from the oppressive attitude of Doctora Zainab and her unsympathetic daughter. At the same time, the placement of this transitional state of identity in relation to the architectural features of the house – in this case the kitchen – evokes the notion of liminal space, defined by Catherine Smith (2001) as a "transitional space; neither one place nor another; neither one discipline nor another; rather a thirdspace in-between".

The gap that starts to form within the household between Najwa and Tamer on the one hand and Doctora Zainab and her daughter on the other is also significantly related to the kitchen space. It is often during their frequent kitchen-based encounters that Tamer reveals to Najwa his disaffection with his mother's and sister's religious and cultural views, a disaffection that is undeniably reciprocated by the latter: "I don't know where he got his religiousness from, Doctora Zaniab complains, "none of us is as observant as him" (Aboulela 2006: 54). What is interesting about this family rift, moreover, is that it is accompanied by a growing affinity between Tamer and Najwa, an affinity that defies social hierarchies and articulates a new, ambivalent complicity between the two. Ambivalence is key to Bakhtinian carnivalization but, as Iris M. Zavala (1990) explains, it does not thwart the carnival's subversive thrust, since its destabilizing, parodic force allows the disenfranchised to denounce asymmetrical power arrangements: "such ambivalence, which asserts and denies, buries and revives is the privileged discourse of the oppressed" (Zavala 1990: 84). There is a specific kitchen encounter between Tamer and Najwa that is particularly evocative of the disruptive nature of carnival ambivalence regarding seemingly insusceptible social roles. The encounter significantly takes place following an embarrassing moment that Najwa has with Tamer's mother, a moment in which the mother insists on reminding Najwa of the importance of respecting social barriers. As the latter characteristically retreats to the safety of the kitchen premises, Tamer arrives: "I am taking the chicken out of the fridge when Tamer walks into the kitchen. He comes close to me and whispers, 'you weren't in the park today'" (Abouela 2006: 125). The proximity between the two as well as the tone of voice (whisper) destabilize the rigidity of the social rules that the mother has just evoked. The subversive nature of the conversation is suggested when Tamer asks Najwa why she has allowed his mother to buy chicken that was not halal. Najwa's reaction is to wonder "does he imagine that his mother and I are on equal terms?" (126). Despite the rhetorical nature of this question, it is precisely the terms of this unequal relation that are being negotiated as Najwa consciously accepts to perform the part of the equal individual in the carnivalesque conversation that ensues:

> I love giving food, watching him eat. He munches and says, 'I can't believe you're going to cook this chicken.'
>
> 'I am.' I pick up a knife and start cutting the wings.
>
> 'I am not going to eat it.'
>
> 'Neither will I.'
>
> 'So I'm supposed to just starve today'? His mouth is full and it makes me laugh. (Abouela 2006: 126-7)

The festive mood of the scene, together with the temporary dissolution of social barriers and laughter, all conjure up the Bakhtinian carnival mode with its creation of an alternative space in which social hierarchies are dismantled and dominant power structures are subverted.

This alternative space not only provides an opportunity to question dominant ideology, but also creates the conditions suitable for a

reversal of power dynamics. Thus, from within the newly established freedom zone in which Najwa is able to have her voice heard emerges a novel order in which the balance of power is actually tilted in favor of the disenfranchised. This new arrangement is articulated in the text through the metaphor of invisibility which Najwa uses to express her altered perception of her role in the household:

> I enjoy being in home rather than cleaning offices and hotels. I like being part of a family, touching their things, knowing what they ate, what they threw in the bin. I know them in intimate ways while they hardly know me, as if I am invisible. It still takes me by surprise how natural I am in this servant role. (Abouela 2006: 53)

I have elsewhere argued that the trope of invisibility is used by several Anglo-Arab writers as an expression of defiance stance vis-à-vis structures of oppression be they gendered, racial or class-based (Ben Amara 2022). In this case, too, invisibility signals a shift in power distribution since it is equated with knowledge and empowerment. What is implied in Najwa's words is that the uneven terms of the home dynamics have paradoxically reinforced her position as an empowered partner by eroding her employer's authority. Moreover, the reversal of roles that is implicit in this reconfigured relationship gives Najwa the upper hand as the dominant side in this contested power game.

4. Conclusion:

At a time when we seem to live in post-national, 'global' world where individual and social experience is largely defined by the myth of unbounded mobility, contemporary social reality continues to rests "on the power of border controls and policing of who does and does not belong" (Ahmed 2003: 5). Against this the impulse for borders and partitions, Leila Aboulela's fiction and particularly *The Translator* and *Minaret* seem to point toward what Anna Ball calls 'borderless world', one whose deterritorialized cartographies are constantly reconfigured. Whether it is through the micropolitics of the domestic space, or the transnational politics of border crossing, Aboulela's texts have shown that the category of space is often bound up with the notions of identity, power, and discursive resistance. Specifically, the texts in question have drawn our attention to the fact that hegemonic conceptions of space as rigid and orderly often hide a more dynamic and fluid reality. Additionally, the analysis of the texts in question has demonstrated that the domestic space is potentially capable of being transformed into a site of resistance, one whose often overlooked narratives depicting individuals' private lives and everyday family practices emerge as the expression of political dissonance. These thematic concerns resonate with current debates on the topics of migration, mobility, and the struggle for social justice. Aboulela's emphasis on the discrepancy between the myth of mobility and the actual limits of social reality echo ongoing debates about the ethical conundrums regarding the fundamental right of individuals and groups to move and develop their potential without hindrance, and the social and economic inequalities of Neoliberal globalization.

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