
Pertenencia en tierras extranjeras: entre el mito y la realidad en *Bird Summons* (2019) de Leila Aboulela.

Belonging in Foreign Lands: Between Myth and Reality in Leila Aboulela's *Bird Summons* (2019)

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RESUMEN: este estudio analiza el impacto controvertido de la migración en los inmigrantes árabes a través de la novela *Bird Summons* (2019) de Leila Aboulela. En el contexto posterior a las revoluciones de la Primavera Árabe, el desplazamiento hacia ciudades europeas ha sido frecuentemente concebido como una vía de escape y una posible solución a las limitaciones políticas, económicas y sociales que enfrentan los jóvenes árabes en sus países de origen. No obstante, Aboulela problematiza esta percepción idealizada de la migración al poner de relieve sus contradicciones y efectos negativos, especialmente en lo que respecta a la experiencia femenina en contextos de diáspora. La novela revela cómo el traslado físico a Occidente no garantiza necesariamente integración, estabilidad ni plenitud identitaria, sino que, por el contrario, puede intensificar sentimientos de exclusión, alienación y desarraigo.

La obra se centra en la trayectoria de tres personajes femeninos —Iman, Moni y Selma— quienes residen en Gran Bretaña y enfrentan distintas formas de desplazamiento cultural, religioso y emocional. A través de sus experiencias individuales y colectivas, la novela pone de manifiesto una búsqueda constante de pertenencia en un entorno que las percibe como “otras”. Estas mujeres se ven obligadas a negociar sus identidades en un espacio occidental que, si bien se presenta como multicultural, continúa reproduciendo mecanismos de marginación hacia los inmigrantes árabes y musulmanes. En este sentido, *Bird Summons* ilustra cómo la diáspora se convierte en un espacio de tensión entre la memoria del lugar de origen y las exigencias de adaptación al país de acogida.

Desde un marco teórico, este estudio se apoya, en primer lugar, en la teoría del multiculturalismo de Charles Taylor, desarrollada en su obra *Multiculturalism*, para examinar las carencias y limitaciones del reconocimiento cultural en las sociedades occidentales. A través de este enfoque, se analiza cómo la falta de un reconocimiento pleno de las identidades culturales y religiosas de los inmigrantes árabes contribuye a su exclusión simbólica y social. En segundo lugar, se

incorporan los conceptos de desterritorialización y reterritorialización formulados por Gilles Deleuze y Félix Guattari en *Mil mesetas*. Estos conceptos permiten explorar la manera en que las protagonistas de la novela desarticulan el territorio físico que las ha convertido en sujetos marginales y, simultáneamente, reconstruyen un espacio simbólico e imaginado de pertenencia y empoderamiento. La combinación de estos dos enfoques teóricos facilita una comprensión más profunda de la identidad diaspórica como un proceso dinámico y en constante transformación. Asimismo, el estudio demuestra que, aunque la migración expone a las protagonistas a múltiples formas de vulnerabilidad, también les permite desarrollar estrategias de resistencia y autoafirmación. En última instancia, esta investigación contribuye al debate contemporáneo sobre hibridez cultural, identidad y multiculturalismo, al tiempo que propone nuevas perspectivas para repensar la noción de pertenencia en contextos transnacionales.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Aboulela, diáspora, inmigrantes árabes, pertenencia, desplazamiento.

ABSTRACT: This study examines the controversial impact of migration on Arab immigrants as portrayed in Leila Aboulela's *Bird Summons* (2019), with particular attention to the gendered dimensions of displacement and belonging. In the aftermath of the Arab Spring revolutions, migration to European cities has often been perceived as a promising solution for Arab youth seeking political freedom, economic stability, and social mobility. However, Aboulela challenges this idealized narrative by foregrounding the complexities and shortcomings of migration, especially for Arab Muslim women living in the diaspora. Rather than presenting migration as a linear path toward empowerment and integration, the novel exposes the persistent struggles of identity negotiation, cultural alienation, and emotional dislocation experienced by immigrants in Western societies.

Bird Summons focuses on the lived experiences of three female protagonists—Iman, Moni, and Selma—who reside in Britain and embark on a journey through several European cities. Each character embodies a distinct response to migration and displacement, reflecting varying degrees of attachment to their cultural, religious, and social roots. Through their interactions and personal reflections, the novel highlights the ongoing quest for belonging within a diasporic context that often marginalizes Arab and Muslim identities. Despite the apparent multiculturalism of British society, the protagonists repeatedly encounter subtle and overt forms of exclusion that challenge their sense of self and community. As a result, belonging emerges as a fragile and contested process rather than a stable or guaranteed outcome of migration.

The theoretical framework of this study draws primarily on Charles

Taylor's theory of multiculturalism, as articulated in his work *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition*. Taylor's emphasis on the need for cultural recognition provides a critical lens through which the deficiencies of Western multicultural models can be examined, particularly in relation to Arab immigrants. The lack of genuine recognition and inclusion contributes to the protagonists' sense of invisibility and reinforces their position as outsiders within the host society. This theoretical perspective allows for an analysis of how cultural misrecognition exacerbates feelings of displacement and undermines the promise of multicultural coexistence.

In addition to Taylor's theory, this study employs the concepts of deterritorialization and reterritorialization developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*. These concepts are instrumental in understanding how the characters symbolically dismantle the physical and social spaces that render them marginalized in Britain and, in turn, reconstruct alternative imagined spaces of belonging. Through shared narratives, spiritual reflection, and female solidarity, the protagonists create metaphorical zones of empowerment that enable them to renegotiate identity and agency beyond the constraints imposed by dominant cultural norms.

By combining these two theoretical approaches, this study offers a comprehensive understanding of diasporic identity as a fluid and transformative process shaped by movement, memory, and resistance. Ultimately, the analysis demonstrates that while migration in *Bird Summons* exposes Arab immigrant women to persistent forms of exclusion and vulnerability, it also opens up possibilities for self-reflection, resilience, and collective empowerment. This research thus contributes to ongoing scholarly debates on hybridity, multiculturalism, and belonging, and underscores the need to rethink migration narratives beyond simplistic notions of success or failure.

KEYWORDS: Mudejar art - coexistence - cultural interactions - Medieval Spain - architecture.

Introduction

Trans-culturality proved itself the kernel the contemporary society due to the constant state of flux and movement. Indeed, many themes developed by Anglophone authors, be they of British, American, or hybrid

descent, have reflected on many themes that emerged from this state of non-fixedness that has blurred all boundaries and limitations to the perception of rigid notions previously considered static in terms of definition and meaning. This trend has mainly been affected by the post-structuralist thoughts, those of Derridian deconstruction in particular, in which the center is seldom fathomed as constructing or providing absoluteness of interpretation. The rise of transcultural or cross-cultural sites has given the ability to investigate not only unquestioned basics but also enabled the encounter of two contradictory poles, which have been generally perceived as opposites to each other: the Eastern and Western poles. Indeed, this has been meticulously investigated in the writings of Edward Said, who has deconstructed the stereotypical recurrence of clichés in the representation of people of Eastern origins.

At the heart of the transcultural encounter, migration plays a pivotal role in deconstructing the myth of the oneness of identity. In other words, identity is being impacted by the very features of the contemporary society in which the Self's existence does not sprout from absoluteness in the understanding of its needs and wants but rather builds a "relational" stance with its surroundings which in turn affects the Self's true identity (Suleiman, 12). Suleiman contends that identity is a "process" based on "mutually constitutive modes" between the Self and Other (12). Indeed, while identity denoted, for some time, as a cultural identity i.e. a representation of a person's background and origins, the contemporary writings, especially those of Arab writers, male or female, dismantle this myth as those living in the diaspora have either taken refuge or been exiled to another country. Kahf, Abu Jaber, Rabih Alemeddine, and others have

tended to represent their native land as a site for “war, death, disease, rape, and insanity” (Al Maleh, 36). Al Maleh comments that the works of Arab writers in the diaspora, particularly those of Alemeddine are “multilocal” as his writing surpasses “the normative fixities” that bestow the absoluteness in the understanding of society and its structures (36). This fusion and mingling of opposites displaced characters, protagonists in particular, as it became a site of “general malaise which can be called a ‘spiritual diaspora’” (36). Equivocally, this “rupture” alludes to a Bakhtinian carnivalist approach that amalgamates opposites and blurs all hierarchies. Yet, significantly enough, the cross-cultural encounter was never detached from power dynamics that manifest the superiority of one pole over another. Indeed, most writings of the diaspora, be they of Arab descent or others, have always manifested that this “halfness” is not represented as a feature that adds power to a person of national hybridity but adds to his labeling as an outcast in the Western world. At the epitome of this representation is Rawi Hage’s *Cockroach* (2010), in which the unnamed protagonist attempts to commit suicide out of his inability to cope with the Canadian city of Montreal. Al Maleh argues that for Arab diasporic writers, the theme of identity and its complexities becomes a “focal point” to “explore the political significance and historical implications that demarcate their positions and boundaries (38). In other words, the cross-cultural encounter is a site to test the realities of multiculturalism and put them into practice. In case of lack of assimilation, these writings provide solutions or alternatives to achieve political and social integration in foreign lands.

Leila Fuad Aboulela is a Sudanese-born writer, essayist, and

playwright based in Aberdeen, Scotland. She has published six novels so far and several short stories translated into fifteen languages. Some of her notable works include *The Translator* (1999), *Minaret* (2005), and *Bird Summons* (2019) in which she investigates the journey of immigrant female characters of Arab descent in the diaspora, particularly in the UK. *Bird Summons*, the concern of the present article, is a story of three different characters by the names of Moni, Salma, and Iman who undergo a trip to pay homage to Lady Evelyn Cobbold, the first female British convert to Islam to execute a pilgrimage to Mecca. The three female characters, in their quest for freedom, are visited by a hoopoe on a hillside to Inverness that makes them question different aspects surrounding their very existence including those of fidelity, love, faith in God, and their femininity. Aboulela's *Bird Summons* has not received much critical attention in academia. In fact, the majority of criticism elaborated on the protagonists' transformative journey as a form of a "spiritual rebirth". Mohamed Kouta has investigated the text as a cosmopolitan narrative. He argues that by using narrative techniques to "cosmopolitanise" the work, Aboulela instigates "the transnational processes of empathy, tolerance, and solidarity" (26). Arkhagha and Awad analyze Aboulela's narrative by providing a new approach to revisiting identity by analyzing the text's reliance on magical realism. They contend that the metamorphosis the three female characters undergo offers a possibility of a "third space" that surpasses national boundaries (125). They contend that "the three women transcend national origin and essentialized views of identity through achieving a faith-based continuation with the land, despite the imperfection of their 'faith(s)'" (125). Majed Aladylah believes that the trio's journey to

Evelyn's grave ended up being a journey of self-discovery and fulfillment "as they face the challenges of their circumstances, dilemmas, and conflicts, they emerge independent, stronger, and wiser" (219). Raslan treats the novel from a psychogeographical point of view in which they mingle nostalgia with a heroic metamorphosis to highlight their lost dreams in the diaspora (365).

She maintains that psychogeography enables the three protagonists to manifest their psychological and spiritual rebirth into "hybrid characters" in the diaspora (379). In contrast to the above-mentioned literature review, this article aims to highlight another dimension of space theory concerning *Bird Summons*. While the mainstream investigated space as related to the forest as a location of metamorphosis and spiritual transformation, this article elaborates on a metaphorical space created by the three protagonists even before reaching the forest, an aspect widely disregarded in academia. These protagonists take refuge from their displacement, caused by their national as well as personal dilemmas, to belong to imaginary spaces they created where they feel safe. This metaphorical/ imaginary space emanates from a state of need as each character reassures the accomplishment of her quest.

1. Salma's Metaphorical Space of Belonging:

I have chosen to start with Salma before the two other characters due to the signs of determinism she bestows from the very beginning of the narrative. We understand that Salma, an Egyptian immigrant, was the one who instigated other characters to go and visit the grave and how successful her life and children are. Despite this evident strength, Salma is a character who suffers "recent restlessness" that makes her feel stagnated in life (2).

Indeed, she refers to herself as a person who keeps “wondering, can I last till the end without giving up or making a fool of myself” (2). This description is recurrent in Arab diasporic narratives in which the protagonist often finds him/ herself a *flâneur* or a dweller in a city s/he is unable to assimilate into. This “dwelling” is often characterized by a state of anguish and agitation which stops the protagonist from progressing forward and assessing different possibilities of belonging.

Salma’s inability to integrate again stems from her inability to assimilate into the culture and being distanced from her family. Indeed, despite being a wife to David and a mother to four successful children, she disagrees with her husband’s “laissez-faire” policy and is cast out from planning her daughter’s future. Planning the holiday to visit the grave was her way out of this state of “anxiety” (8). The aspect that added to the character’s displacement was that she felt her children were “more British and less a piece of her” and that is why she decided to focus on Iman to satisfy her ego. Analyzing Salma’s character at this stage is quite challenging because, in contrast to the two other protagonists, she deterritorializes the territory twice. On the one hand, she creates a metaphorical space of belonging with Iman to satisfy her ego, which manifests itself through the concretization of being needed and admired by somebody, which is an aspect that her husband and children fail to provide her with. On the other hand, she resorts to another space of belonging by using technology as a smooth space to feel appreciated by using nostalgia and reconnecting with Amir, her ex-boyfriend. This double-deterritorializing process of both nation and the familial social construct makes Salma a nomad *par excellence*. To Deleuze and Guattari, “with the nomad, on the contrary, it is

detritorialization that constitutes the relation to the earth, to such a degree that the nomad reterritorializes on detritorialization itself” (281). In other words, Salma, as a nomad, detritorializes the foundation of the State that rendered her an outcast, triggers her state of alienation, and reterritorializes another imaginary space of belonging where her needs and ego are satisfied. In this sense, and according to both theorists, the land functions as a support to help the nomad construct the new territory (381).

1. Moni’s Metaphorical Space of Belonging:

Moni is portrayed as a follower from her early description in the novel. Indeed, after being abandoned by the group, Salma was still determined to pursue the trip to the grave. Moni, mother to a sick child who suffers from severe cerebral palsy, decided to keep her company not due to her willingness to go, but simply out of “solidarity” with Salma. In fact, “she felt beholden to Salma for all her help with Adam’s condition.” 3). Moni’s state of malaise stems from her son’s sickness and separation from her husband. She reaches a state of numbness after being asked by her husband to move from Scotland to Saudi Arabia, her husband’s workplace, yet fears that her movement might endanger her son’s treatment in Scotland. Therefore, she decides to remain there to better perform her motherly duties towards her son, Adam. When preparing herself for the trip, Moni could never think of being separated from her son. Indeed, even if she thought of hiring a nurse and talking constantly to her child, she was not able to fathom that her son would “be fed by a stranger” as an “inconsiderate parent” (6). This shows that Moni’s relationship with her son Adam exceeds a simple bond between a mother and her child. Their inability to

integrate both in Scotland as foreigners and their separation from a normal family enabled the creation of a space of freedom and peacefulness in which both characters find refuge in each other. Aboulela, in explaining these ties, writes: “With him was total belonging and peace. She didn’t want to leave... she was happy like this, her lap full of his closeness, his smell, his sounds” (6). Even when thinking of taking him to the nursing home, she thought of herself helping the nurses and that would provide her with all the change she needed (6). Indeed, it seems that Moni’s inability to separate from her son stems from her fear of losing her only space of belonging. Compromising this metaphorical space of inclusion might lead to her ongoing state of being a flaneur in Scotland, wandering with no purpose, which might lead to the creation of a severe existential crisis. According to Deleuze and Guattari, the creation of an open/ smooth space is based on a deconstruction of an already established territory of the State and challenging it from within (353). This act of “deterritorializing the enemy” would provide another “justice, another movement, another space-time” (353). Indeed, Moni typifies the concretization of a nomad or a war machine who deterritorializes her reality, imposed on her by social constructs, by taking refuge in an imaginary space in which she can find her peacefulness.

3. Iman’s Metaphorical Space of Belonging:

Iman is “Salma’s sidekick” who defends and protects her as a “devoted, much younger sister” (3). She is described as a “beautiful” character who attracted men from afar, yet is not that lucky with her marriages; despite being in her twenties, she is already in her third one. She keeps telling

stories of her potential suitors in a “flat voice, as if it was boring, after all, to be stunning”

(4). In other words, Iman does not seem to appreciate her beauty as it causes her a sort of malaise rather than a state of praise or appreciation. While most women value the power their physical appearance can bring, to Iman it causes a state of alienation and anxiety. Iman keeps manifesting, throughout the narrative, a dream of being a wife, having a child, and bringing her mother from Syria (9). While reflecting on their hopes in the car, Iman shares her most terrible nightmare with Salma and Moni of not having a child and a future at the same time (9). She even thinks that out of the three marriages she had, no husband offered her a “miscarriage to kindle some ‘nearly there’ hope” (8). Thus, the character suffers from a severe existential crisis in which her hope and happiness are conditioned by marital duties (9). Indeed, while being married to her third husband, Iman shows that her metaphorical refuge is always conditioned by being surrounded by others and being dependent. Despite her admiration of Salma’s confidence and perseverance, she never thought of having those qualities herself, but always needed to see them performed by Salma to ensure her safety (13). Iman always needs people to belong. Although possessive friends and husbands always surround the female protagonist, she never thought of escaping this chain of adulation and even if she becomes independent, somehow, “it would not take the shape of aloneness, she was sure” (13). The territory created by Iman is that of being “guided”, “adopted” and “sponsored” by others while she shows them her complete allegiance. Yet, she states in the novel that this breakthrough one day and “no one would hold her back” once she decides to change (14).

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