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Migration and Its Discontents: Study of Leila Aboulela's *Bird Summons*

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ABSTRACT

Bird Summons by Leila Aboulela has caught the attention of researchers and media people alike, for differing reasons, though there are a few common perspectives too among them. Their most common perspective is looking at the novel as an immigrant bildungsroman where the childlike immigrants come of age and try to assimilate themselves in a culture in which the hosts are generally hostile to their presence in their midst. The present study is a reading of *Bird Summons* from a postcolonial perspective. The research method employed was close reading of the text, and the objective of the present study was to interpret the selected text in view of the fictional representation of Muslim Arab diaspora, particularly in the UK. The finding of the research is that the plot, theme, and the narrative point of the novel are a veiled representation of migrants' discontents with their condition in the new land, their loss of identity, and the issues they face in a foreign land, leaving everything behind, some of them even burning the boat, and feeling lost for lack of assimilation in the new society. The culturally shocked and emotionally unsettled immigrants then start looking all over thinking where they had gone wrong in their decision-making that they have to face such hardships, looking for similarities and differences in the two cultural milieus – the home culture and the host culture – and then learning to unlearn their own language. They realize that it is only the death of their birth identity which can redeem them to live a normal life. The significance

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of the present research lies in its contribution to the understanding of the neo-colonial, hegemonic social structures ever present in an erstwhile colonial centre, and the strategies of adjustment the diaspora population adopts to cope with the ensuing tensions.

Keywords: *Bird Summons*; identity crisis; immigration; Islamic spiritualism; Islamophobia; Leila Aboulela; refugees.

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الهجرة والاستياء منها: دراسة لرواية استدعاء الطيور للكاتبة ليلي أبو العلى

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المستخلص:

لقد لفتت رواية "استدعاء الطيور" للكاتبة ليلي أبو العلى انتباه الباحثين ووسائل الإعلام لأسباب مختلفة، لكن توجد بعض وجهات النظر المشتركة بينهم. إن وجهة النظر الأكثر شيوعاً هي اعتبار الرواية كرواية تعليمية للمهاجرين حيث يحاول المهاجرون استيعاب الثقافة الجديدة في مجتمع معادي لوجودهم بينهم. إن تفسير لرواية "استدعاء الطيور" أظهر أن الحكمة والموضوع والسرد في الرواية تصور استياء المهاجرين من حالتهم في المجتمع الجديد، وفقدانهم للهوية، والمشاكل التي يواجهونها في المجتمع الجديد، وتركهم لكل شيء وراءهم، وشعورهم بالضياع بسبب عدم تقبلهم في المجتمع الجديد. إن المهاجرين، الذين يعانون من صدمة ثقافية وعدم استقرار نفسي، يفكرون ملياً ليتوصلوا إلى الأخطاء التي ارتكبوها والتي أدت إلى مواجهتهم لمثل هذه الصعوبات، ويبحثون عن أوجه التشابه والاختلاف بين الثقافتين) ثقافة أوطانهم والثقافة الجديدة (ويتعلمون كيفية التخلي عن لغتهم. يدرك المهاجرون بأنه فقط في حال موت هويتهم فإنهم سوف يتمكنوا من العيش بشكل طبيعي في المجتمع الجديد.

الكلمات الدالة: استدعاء الطيور، أزمة الهوية، الهجرة، الروحانية الإسلامية، رهاب الإسلام، ليلي أبو العلى، اللاجئون.

1. INTRODUCTION

Leila Aboulela (1964-) is a contemporary Anglophone writer of Arab descent living in Britain. Aboulela migrated to Britain from Sudan. She is a novelist, dramatist, and short story writer. Her fictional works are recognized as revolving around Muslim [women's] experiences in diaspora, and her works are considered to have been inspired by her own migration. Aboulela has authored several widely acclaimed novels, such as *The*

Translator (1999), *Minaret* (2005), *Lyrics Alley* (2011), *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015), *Bird Summons* (2019), and *River Spirit* (2023). Her novel *Bird Summons* tells the story of three immigrant Muslim women – Salma, Moni and Iman – in Britain whose existence is threatened in the country for various reasons. They seek some solace and find a spiritual solution to their unending problems. To that end, they decide to take up a journey to the grave of Lady Evelyn Cobbold, the first British woman to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca in 1933 (Wolfe, 1997). The purpose of the visit was also to honor Lady Evelyn, to educate themselves about the history of Islam in Britain, and, “to integrate better by following the example of those who were of this soil and of their faith, those for whom this island was an inherited rather than adopted home” (*Bird Summons*, p. 1). *Bird Summons* is a postcolonial fiction in which the narrative plays on elements, such as magical realism, that undermine the predominant narratives of race, ethnicity, language, culture, and so on. Arkhagha and Awad (2021) observe that Aboulela incorporates elements of magical realism in *Bird Summons* to convey and undermining the dominant ethnic and racial discourses which affect the self-image of the racialized minority immigrants, such as Arabs in Britain. The researchers demonstrate that the use of magical realism in *Bird Summons* reinforces the fictional purposes of Aboulela that she is a hyphenated Arab. The elements allow the writer to undermine dominant discourses on hyphenated Arab identities. The researchers add that the use of magical realism allows Aboulela to (re)construct Arab British identities within her novel, apart from the essentialist views of their identity which is defined by their colonial experience back home.

The present research is aimed at reading *Bird Summons* from a postcolonial perspective since a cursory glance at the novel is sufficient to notice the elements of identity crisis in the lives of the three protagonists caused by their migration to an erstwhile colonial centre. The other elements noticeable in the fiction that make it a fit subject of interpretation using postcolonial literary theory are the ideas of cultural hybridization, mimicry and cultural authenticity. The researcher has employed close reading of the text as the selected research methodology. The ancillary objective of the present study was to understand the fictional representation of Muslim Arab diaspora, particularly in the UK.

2. BIRD SUMMONS

Bird Summons (2019) is the story of three friends –Salma, Moni, and Iman – who are immigrants in Great Britain, coming from three different places- Egypt, Pakistan, and Syria respectively. Salma, a middle-aged woman who was a physician back home, works as a masseuse. In Britain, she gave up her right to work as a physician. She falls in love with a Scottish doctor, David, marries him and moves to Scotland. Salma is so westernized that her friend Moni wonders about her Islamic identity:

Salma looked fit and sweaty, emitting waves of heat. She put her bottle down and pushed herself forward, face down the grass, she started to do push up, and Moni was vaguely impressed but felt somewhat embarrassed for her friend. Salma was acting western. Sometimes, Moni did sense a gulf between them and became actively conscious that Salma had crossed a line Moni would never cross. (*Bird Summons*, p. 102)

However, there comes a moment in her life when she is afraid of being deported because she was not born in Britain. There was news of the opinions of a politician to deport everybody not born in Britain, and Salma was the only outsider in her home. She feels jittery, and to subdue her anxiety, Salma starts using social media to contact Amir, her old Egyptian colleague from university and her former fiancé. However, this contact makes her homesick and nostalgic about her past life, the life she had enjoyed and had more control over it, compared to her precarious situation in Britain:

Salma found herself turning more towards Amir, towards their shared past, a time of certainties and hopes. The regret that she had married David and moved to Britain began to gather into an emotion, almost a fact. She had made a mistake. Amir was her ideal mate, her home city, the true beloved. (*Bird Summons*, p. 190)

Moni was a banker in her homeland, Pakistan, whereas, in Britain she is jobless and depends on her husband to send her the survival money. She has a son who is disabled and needs care. Her husband works in Saudi Arabia and supports her financially. But there came a time in her life when his support began dwindling and gradually, he became indifferent to her plight in Britain with their disabled son. Iman, an immigrant to Britain from Syria, on the other hand, was never employed. Iman is in her twenties, but she is unhappy about her life because she doesn't like the way she is treated (like a pet). The problem is that she depends upon her beauty and charms to survive, and that makes her feel inadequate in the society she is living in at the moment, though her circumstances have brought maturity in her character: "Iman had grown up. She wore maturity like a cape, and it was the best piece of clothing she had ever put on" (*Bird Summons*, p. 261). In the second half of the novel, magical realism dominates the plot. The three women are visited by the hoopoe on their spiritual journey who guides them in their path. Hoopoe is considered a sacred bird in Islam and even in the Celtic folklore. The bird makes them question their perspectives on life, the meaning of self, being, faith, hurdles in life, meaning of love, what they want from life, and so on. In the end they emerge as different human beings.

3. THE ISSUES

The three central characters – Salma, Moni, and Iman – in *Bird Summons* suffer from identity crisis, for different reasons though. Salma's crisis emanates from the fact that even after living so many years in her host country, she feels unacceptable in, and thus alienated from, society. The problem is, at this stage in her life Salma cannot identify herself with any of the countries, Egypt or Britain. The fact is, she left Egypt because she was not happy there, while she cannot identify herself with Britain since she is not acceptable there. So, she is no man's land, in an abyss. She can think of Egypt only as past and be nostalgic about the happy life she had there. But it's impossible for her to return to this past- she has come a long way, and there would be huge, irreconcilable adjustment issues even if she decides to return. The question is, why would she think of returning to Egypt? The simplest answer is that it's her lack of integration and immigration woes that prompt her to be nostalgic about her home. The roots of Moni's identity crisis are different from that of Salma. Moni has lived in Britain for five years. She prefers to be there and never thinks of returning to Pakistan. It's her social problems

which impede her full and successful integration in the British society. First, she must single-handedly take care of her handicapped son, Adam, who suffers from cerebral palsy. Her Saudi Arabia-bound husband initially supports her stay, but as she refuses to join him in Saudi Arabia because her feeling is that her son gets the required advanced medical care in the Western country, she alienates herself from him. Second, she feels guilty for giving birth to an impaired child, and as a result, loses selfhood as well as her self-esteem as a woman. Third, she feels she was no longer attractive; she even thought of herself as less feminine. Iman, who also migrated, escaping the war zone in her homeland, Syria, to Britain has also lived in the country for almost five years when the story begins. The causes of her problems are mostly personal but aggravated by her immigration to the new culture. By personal reasons I mean issues like her lack of qualifications, her financial dependence on her life-partners, and her inability to bear children. She has been through three failed marriages and remained issueless. Her third husband, Ibrahim, divorces her while she is on the pilgrimage, although in the beginning it was Ibrahim who had "rescued her from her homelessness and aimlessness" (*Bird Summons*, p. 34). These issues greatly hinder the development of a normal subjectivity; she hasn't grown up as an independent adult. Iman, in fact, is burdened by her beauty. She is treated like a grown-up child and pet by her lovers and friends. She strongly desires to break free of this imposed persona. Their journey allows the three pilgrims the mental freedom to question the balance between spirituality and femininity, love, loyalty, and sacrifice.

4. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A cursory glance at the literature available on *Bird Summons* at present suffices to safely comment that there is a dearth of research on the novel. At the moment, almost all the [research] work available as research literature on the novel is book reviews and interviews. Academic research studies are only a few, just negligible (e.g. Abdelrazek-Alsiefy, 2023; Aladylah, 2023; Arkhagha and Awad, 2021; Saleh et al., 2024). Moreover, the existing studies on *Bird Summons* are readings of the novel as a spiritual journey of the central characters, a kind of introspection and self-investigation with reference to the host culture and traditions in an attempt to bridge the gap between incompatible cultures, spiritualities, myths, and traditions to fix the fault with oneself as a panacea for instant acceptance (Cosslett, 2019; DeZelar-Tiedman, 2020; Parssinen, 2019; Viswanathan, 2020). Arkhagha and Awad's (2021) study of *Bird Summons* adopts an analytical approach to explicate the use of magical realism in *Bird Summons*. The researchers say that the technique allows the writer to undermine dominant discourses on hyphenated Arab identities and to construct Arab British identities in her works. However, very little attention has been paid to the this-worldly critical dimensions of the book dealing with the root cause of the problems of unsettled life of immigrants in the new countries they like to call home, but the conditions do not allow them to do so. At this juncture, Al-Maleh's (2009b) opening comment in her essay will be an apt reminder of the situation. Al-Maleh (2009a, 2009b) notices that the Arab Anglophone literature was noticed in the west only after the unfortunate 9/11. In that context, my argument is that the same had been the fate of the Arab immigrants in the West. To common people in the West, they don't exist at all, but suddenly become a threatening presence on the streets of their

metropolis if any of the members of the community is accused of something unexpected or unfortunate. The recent anti-Muslims, anti-immigrant, anti-refugee, anti-asylum seeker, racist riots in England, and attacks on Muslim business establishments in their aftermath is the hottest example of this phenomenon. There seems to be no end to this otherization of immigrants in the West, people looking at them as multifarious threats in their midst. In this regard, Rasheed & Hamad (2021) clearly express the suffering of Muslim immigrants in America after September attacks.

However, notwithstanding the existing challenges, a few Anglophone writers of Arab origin have carved out a niche for themselves and gained prominence in the Western canon (Abdul-Jabbar, 2019). Aboulela is one of them. To Hassan (2008), Aboulela's fictional work represents two historical developments since the 1970s: the first is the Islamic resurgence that has attempted to fill the void left by the failure of Arab secular ideologies of modernity, and the second is the growth of immigrant Muslim minorities in Europe and United States of America. Or, for example, Aldea (2011) finds the use of magical realism in Aboulela's fiction intriguing. Aldea (2011) looks at postcolonial texts from a Deleuzian perspective where magical realism plays a crucial role in the narrative. The power of magical realism holds, in the words of the researcher, not because it subverts the real and the magical, but because it allows the two to remain entirely different and yet indiscernible, thus challenging the existing readings of the genre. Although it must be admitted at this juncture that magical realism is not favored by all readers. It is but natural that Aboulela's fictional works deal with the problems of Arab immigrants in Britain because she has herself faced the same kind of problems as an immigrant and looked at their homelessness from a close angle, although she admits that with time her characters started to feel more at ease in Britain, as she herself feels integrated in the culture. Aboulela has acknowledged the crucial role of her religion and spirituality in her integration. *Bird Summons* is a testimony to this shift in her perspective towards the host culture in contrast to a strictly post-colonial reading of the issues immigrant writers from erstwhile colonies assume in their works.

In *Bird Summons*, Aboulela relies heavily on the Sufi concept of the soul having a spiritual homeland different than that of the physical body. Responding to an interview question by Parssinen (2020) concerning the theme of homecoming in her story telling, she says that her fascination with the idea of home and her intense homesickness led her to accept the said Sufi concept. The idea is that our bodies are at home on earth, but our spiritual homeland is the heavens. Aboulela employs this Sufi concept to paint the picture of the struggles of the three central characters in *Bird Summons* and suggests that their struggles come to an end when they realize the spiritual oneness of not only each other but of all human creatures, beyond the narrow confines of cultures and traditions. In this regard DeZelar-Tiedman (2020) notes that strange occurrences force the three Arab British women to face their personal crises, and the occurrences were spiritual in nature. In the words of Cosslett (2019), Aboulela's fictional works are 'lyrical' and they examine homesickness, grief, and the liminal nature of immigrant identities. And I would add, they investigate immigrant identity crisis, obliquely suggesting the ways of possible integration.

As noted above, research works on *Bird Summons* are scanty, but Aboulela's other fictional works have attracted researchers' critical attention, and from various literary

critical perspectives. I hope a short critical discussion of her works wouldn't be out of place here; it would rather function as a connecting thread to her thought process in her works. Abu-Shomar (2020), for instance, reads Aboulela's *The Translator* (2015) as a text representing cultural hybridity following Bhabha's (1994) idea of translational hybridity in postcolonial theory. In the instance of cultural hybridity, national cultures no longer have fixed boundaries, and the notion of cultural authenticity or purity is no longer valid as it shifts into *translationalism*. Similarly, in de Souza's (2011) words, culture is no longer a noun but a verb; it shifts. In fact, we can visualize it shifting in Aboulela's fictional works.

Scholars have also shown research interests in Aboulela's use of magical realism in *Bird Summons*, particularly concerning the magical powers of the hoopoe. Hassan (2008) likens Aboulela's fiction to that of the fiction of the father of Sudanese novel, Tayeb Salih. Hassan supports his argument saying that like Salih, Aboulela is preoccupied with migration between North and South, cultural perceptions, and stereotypes. Hassan's critique of Aboulela also concerns her shift in emphasis towards altered realities, altered from the heydays of postcolonial realities, though which still need anti-hegemonic critique. Aboulela also tries to find the possibilities of building bridges between former colonizers and colonized through her fiction, exactly what Salih did. Ghazoul (2001) also expresses similar sentiments in an interview. Aboulela's fiction, in the words of Ghazoul (2001), aspires to cement the ties of South and North under the emblem of a universal quest, and that Islamic humanism is an extremely significant element in her works. Scholars, such as Campbell (2019), are highly positive about the success of the approach Aboulela follows in her fiction as, according to the researcher, the theory of the clash of civilizations (and the incompatibility of east and west) is dangerous and reactionary, and therefore, an illusion. It is only a theory of intercultural synthesis with imaginative vision that is the pressing need of time. According to Campbell (2019), the narrative in *The Kindness of Enemies* moves both ways, into the East and into the West. However, readers are required to have an analytic historical perspective on a Nineteenth Century Sufi rebellion during the Crimean War. The perspective is seen as a counterpoint to the present state of contemporary Britain. Thus, in a sense, Aboulela presents a great cultural exchange and intertextuality among events, symbols and cultural texts. Ron Geaves (2006) seems to agree with Campbell (2019) as the researcher notes that, among other factors, the non-traditional attitude of younger generations of British Sufi Muslims can be largely credited to bring forth the reformist movements in Britain. In a similar vein, Awad (2018) argues that Aboulela's representation of non-traditional Sufism in *The Kindness of Enemies* [2015] is the counterpoint of radical Islam and extremist Muslim movements.

However, a few researchers, Awad (2012) being one of them, are unhappy about the tendency of Arab British women novelists, Aboulela being the prominent one of them, to emphasize the need for and advocate trans-cultural dialogue and cross ethnic identification strategies like what Aboulela does in *Bird Summons*. Awad (2012) says that Leila Aboulela valorizes trans-cultural and cross-ethnic dialogues and alliances in her novels, while the need of the time is to present a critique of the marginalization of "alien" cultures from a postcolonial perspective. Awad is more at home with the American counterparts of Arab British women novelists who, according to the researcher, are more awakened to the persistent and pressing issues before the Arab immigrants in the Western

world, and who employ literary strategies to resist stereotypes and prevailing misconceptions about Arab communities in American popular culture. The researcher's feeling is that the pronounced differences emanate from two diverse racialized Arab immigration and settlement patterns on the two sides of the Atlantic. Funk et al. (2004) on the other hand, puts emphasis on intercultural complementarity because the approach can help agents of conflict transformation, such as Aboulela, reframe differences and advance the cause of peaceful coexistence and subside the intensification of conflict. The stories of intercultural confrontation and incompatibility of Islamic world and the West can only be divisive.

To sum up, the literature reviewed above displays a clear lack of research studies on Aboulela's representation of the issues of Arab immigrants living in the Western world. There exists a gap in research literature on this important academic issue.

5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The selected novel has been interpreted from the perspective of postcolonial reading of fictional texts, particularly looking at the text keeping in view Homi Bhabha's (1994) notions of identity, hybridity, mimicry and cultural authenticity. De Souza and Andreotti's (2011) ideas on culture being a verb are also found to be relevant for the present study. Bhabha's idea that in the instance of cultural hybridity, national cultures no longer have fixed boundaries, and the notion of cultural authenticity or purity is no longer valid as it shifts into *translationalism* has been quite helpful in understanding the textual tensions.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 IMMIGRANTS AND IDENTITY CRISIS

The literary works of Arab British writers, such as Ahdaf Soueif, Hanan Al-Shaykh, Nadifa Mohamed, Selma Dabbagh, and Leila Aboulela (to name only a few) echo their marginal position on the huge British literary canvas, precisely because they are marginalized. Their themes, concerns, characters, points of view, storyline in fiction, etc., all reflect their dilemma regarding their identity, which is associated with the history of cultural, political, economic, and social marginalization and invisibility of the Arab ethnic minority in Britain. In the same context, Tahir (2023) confirms that Arab immigrant authors address the issue of identity crisis in their novels, which reflect their own experiences (p. 72). The result is that it is common to find the Arab British writers exploring various alliances – trans-cultural, trans-ethnic, cross-religion, cross-linguistic, and so on – in a more pronounced manner than their counterpart diaspora Arabs in other parts of the world, and Leila Aboulela is no exception to this rule. Her *Bird Summons* is an example in case. In Britain, their distinct Arab Muslim identity is subsumed by the dominant South-Asian Muslim identity, who are already “the other” there, resulting in the Arab Muslims becoming “the other ‘other,’” hardly recognized as an ethnic group. When it comes to being an Arab Muslim woman, the problem of identity gets more complicated and compounded. Third-world women in western literature have often been depicted as submissive, illiterate, vulnerable, and having no identity. They are cast from the outside discourses, always entangled in the gaze of the west as being primitive (Mohammed and Rasheed, 2022). In general, Arab Muslim women appear only in the so-called “Western emancipatory” narratives.

Otherwise, Arab women go completely unnoticed, or if noticed, they evoke the image of a submissive woman bogged down by her cultural and religious umbilical cord since the image is useful in building up a particular narrative for the consumption of a Western audience. Shalhoub-Kevorkian's (2004) observation is very apt in this regard, who writes that unless the stories of Arab women serve the interest of the powerful (read Western, male, white), they are non-stories. The researcher gives examples from the “emancipation” stories of Afghani women who became a US concern as it served the political interests of the United States, i.e., to justify their ongoing proxy war in Afghanistan. In a similar fashion, the stories of Iraqi women, portrayed as oppressed and in need of emancipation, became the top stories in the US media as the United States was preparing the American public for the war on Iraq. Shalhoub-Kevorkian notes that interestingly, once the war was over and their purpose was achieved, no one ever heard the stories of “oppressed” Iraqi women or saw their faces on TV, and nobody ever talked about the raping of Iraqi women following the American occupation of Iraq.

Memory plays a significant role in Aboulela’s *Bird Summons*, and so does forgiveness. The role of memory in various forms, such as cultural memory, historical links, and spiritual lineage, is crucial in the novel as it shapes the identity of the main characters, and forgiveness comes into play after they cast off their assumed identities and take on different roles after their encounters with the hoopoe. The diaspora population relies on their collective as well as individual memories as they struggle with the trauma of uprootedness, crisis, and homesickness. Salma’s homesickness encourages her to relive her memories, for instance, as she faces an uncertain future in Scotland. Once again, it’s collective memory that helps the three women reconnect with their cultural roots as well as with their new home. It is significant to note that memory and rootedness in her past cultural-spiritual soil is a crucial point in Aboulela’s fiction, and to her it’s the immigrants’ past that has the redeeming power in their present, as in contrast, notes Sellman (2018), some immigrants from Arab countries “burn” their past to become acceptable in the West, although it should be added that those are predominantly refugees, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants. The Arabic literature, especially fiction, of undocumented Arab migration to Europe focused on their perspectives narrates the experiences of such migrants who burn their citizenship documents before crossing the Mediterranean, figuratively burning their past, become undocumented and face all the violence and wilderness as undocumented migrants. This literature is termed as *Harraga* literature, as the term *harraga* means “those who burn.” To Aboulela, burning the past would further deepen the identity crisis.

Bird Summons lends itself to a postcolonial theory-oriented interpretation concerning hybridity, ambivalence, and sense of alienation in the lives of its protagonists, woven in its texture, which is brought about by their immigration to the foreign land. Salma, the chief protagonist, is sad, dejected, alienated, and mentally distanced from the land she wishes to call her home, although Aboulela shows that Salma does not want to return to her homeland too, rather she finds her husband very cooperative in contrast to men in her homeland,

David was a Scottish convert, and that meant that she was treated better by him than her friends who were married to Arab, African, or Asian men.

David gave her all the freedom she wanted. He respected her opinions. He shared all the household tasks. (*Bird Summons*, p. 10)

People of the host country and the situation prompts her to think that there was nothing like a “pure” culture, race or religion; cultures and races have always, since the time immemorial, been coming in contact and getting hybridized, and therefore, there should be no need to feel any “impurity” about our religion culture, or race simply because we do not belong to the Eurocentric geopolitical space, that we were colonized by once. The notion of purity of any culture and race is a colonial construct serving the power regime through hegemony (Hall and Gay, 1996). Intertextuality, in other words, hybridity, is ever present. If Lady Evelyn Cobbold came under the influence of Islam and went on a pilgrimage to Mecca, there is nothing surprising in her act, and by visiting her grave, they, the three friends, would be reaffirming the hybridization in cultures. Salma succeeds in persuading her two friends, Moni and Iman, to accompany her on her journey, employing the same thought process since they too were in the same mental state, i.e., sad, dejected, alienated and seeking solace in spiritual quest, trying to put things in their lives in order, and under control.

The journey of the three women protagonists in the novel does bring a sense of fulfilment in their lives, a sense of achievement and completeness. They are now determined to pursue the clear path to success for the rest of their stay in the foreign land, opposed to the state of ambivalence they had always been living with. All the three women had developed ambivalent sensibilities after their immigration to Britain, regarding everything in there, i.e., they wished to have mastery over English but felt the language was alien to them; they wished to submerge themselves in the local culture but it's values clashed with what they have imbibed at home; they wished for the same kind of easy life in Britain as they had in their place of birth, but adjustment issues make life difficult for them;. They had conflicting ideas towards the adoption of western culture, and they were always trapped in the binaries of east / west, exclusion / inclusion, fragmentation / collectivity, relocation / dislocation, religious / secular, regional / universal, attachment / estrangement, familiar / unfamiliar, known / unknown, stagnation / movement, and so on. It is their journey under the guidance of the wise hoopoe that sets them free. Interestingly, hoopoe is a trope learnt from ancient scriptures, such as the Holy Qur'an and the Old Testament. The story of hoopoe is not only mystical but also mythological that bears a huge cultural symbolism as the bird is mentioned in the Quran as well as in the Bible, that the hoopoe served king Solomon, spreading good news of Solomon to all who would listen, travelling the land for three months without food and water (Quran, 27:20). Thus, the hoopoe legend spiritually connects the three religions sharing the umbilical cord – an instance of ancient hybridization of cultures. The point is, it is hybridity, intertextuality, and universalism of the spiritual aspect of religion that open the door to their deliverance and recreation of a new peaceful world in the new land.

The protagonists' sense of alienation and marginalization in Britain also owes to their status as migrants, particularly, the feeling of their cultural exclusion owing to difference in religion. The conditions aggravate their homesickness; grief and the liminality of their existence add to this, which is a common nature of immigrant identities; challenges encountered by Arab Muslims in the West regarding their cultural identity which is largely shaped by misconceptions about and misrepresentations of Islam and Muslims in

the West. The important point in the novel is that the protagonists decide to take a journey for religious-spiritual reasons, so, it is obvious that religion plays an important part in their sense of alienation. They may have a few ideas prevailingly etched at the back of their mind, such as the notion of Islamophobia in Britain, the attempts the Sufis had been making in Britain to make some inroads in the cultural life there but failing, and the unease many Muslim women might feel in such an apparently hostile environment. Therefore, it is not surprising, and needs emphasis, that the transformation in the character of the three women pilgrims occurs while they are in a western country and visiting the grave of a figure who they can consciously relate to, especially because of their religion. The faith they find is the faith of Lady Evelyn, which is the backbone of the faith behind “atmosphere or organised religion... where there were simplicity and balance. Not the indulgence of the secluded life, neither the gratification of services nor the voluptuousness of identity” (*Bird Summons*, p. 274).

When the three friends decided to go on a road trip to visit the grave, their lives were in a mess. Salma was married and had three kids, but she is unsure of her future in Great Britain. Her anxiety led her to be nostalgic about the carefree life she had back home, and longs for now. Moni’s life had turned upside down since she must look after her disabled son, Adam, alone as she would get no help from her indifferent husband in Saudi Arabia. She had to find a job to support herself, which was not an easy task. And Iman is suffocated in botched up marriages and yearns for freedom and autonomy. She has lived with three men in failed marriages and never bore a child. These conditions are part of the reasons that force the three friends to review their relationships with faith, love, loyalty, and sacrifice. The leader of the group, Salma, is highly influenced by the character of Lady Evelyn Cobbold. She is the one who inspires the other two to visit her grave. At that time, none of them had any idea that this journey had the potential to bring unexpectedly positive changes in their stagnant lives, that they will overcome their inability to achieve a successful integration in British society.

I argue that their decision to visit the grave of Lady Evelyn marks a few important points of departure in their lives. First, their decision is intertwined with the issues of their transnational identities, belonging issues, frustrations of displacement, forced invisibility, hurting social isolation, and suffocating alienation. Second, their decision reflects a communal concern and a look back at their own religious affiliations, and re-evaluating those affinities in light of the dominant religion and culture of the soil they are in. They visualize the empowering aspects of the religion they are born into, in seeing it in tandem with the religion of the foreign land. Here Sufism proves of great help to them. Third, the major transformational experience which helps them establish transnational relations among themselves as well as in their cross-cultural relations with others in Britain happens to them in a mysterious fashion and prompts them to make better connections with their Islamic spirituality. The characters undergo metamorphoses- Moni turns into a Swiss ball, Iman becomes an animal, and Salma turns flat as a doormat. This experience might be interpreted as regeneration of the self without death of the self, that is, the self doesn’t have to be annihilated under the influence of the other. For instance, scholars have now begun claiming that that Arab diaspora writers like Aboulela are becoming more and more comfortable in their host countries. The concerns of the community these writers express in their fiction, such as displacement and ambivalence, are well understood in the alien cultural ethos (Al Maleh, 2009a, 2009b). After the

journey, all three of them assume a different, a more accommodating self with a more inclusive view of the world. For example, Salma realizes that she had been highly possessive and dominant with her loved ones. Now she decides not to interfere in the lives of her children, not pushing them to achieve what she herself couldn't. She also comes out of the anxiety of failure because of, what she thought were, her shortcomings. That also means no anxiety if she doesn't qualify the exam to become a practicing doctor in Britain. Moni begins to love her life as it comes to her. She breaks her cocoon shell and looks around her, and for the first time realizes that her life was beautiful and fascinating. She was someone more than the mother of a disabled child, that she had an individual self as well which also needed her attention, more than a full-time career. Iman, who had never attained autonomy as an immigrant, now feels she has overcome her trauma and achieves independence. She realizes her shyness has also disappeared and that she became bold enough to speak English fluently, a sign of her newly gained self-confidence.

However, some scholars, for example, Wahab (2014), who has explored Aboulela's early fiction, finds that the textual representation of the invisible Arab men and women and East-West cultural exchange in the works of Aboulela are signs of counter-discourse and counter-Orientalism, which may not be very helpful in advocating for a non-Eurocentric approach in the present postcolonial scenario. Abdelrazek-Alsiefy (2023) also expresses similar concerns since, according to him, the representation of Arab Muslim women in *Bird Summons* tells a third story of post-colonial hybrid identities which stresses upon the diversity of Muslim women's subjectivities, and that problematizes the notion of hybridity celebrated by postcolonial scholars, such as Homi Bhabha (1994). Abdelrazek-Alsiefy observes that,

their emergent identity does not follow the post-colonial secular third space. This group of Muslim women's feminist attitude is based on a more extended version of feminism that includes commitments to their religion as integral to their Muslim identity in a secular age; this is particularly applicable to Muslim women in the West, where the religious aspect of their identity is highlighted over their nationalism (Abdelrazek-Alsiefy, 2023: 239)

The other two stories, in the context of Arab women, are passive a religious, veiled Muslim woman in the colonizer metropolis, and a hybrid identity brought about by colonial experience.

7. CONCLUSION

To sum up, Leila Aboulela's fictional narrative *Bird Summons* is a veiled representation of Arab Muslim migrants' unhappy conditions in the Western nations, the land which they approach to call their new home. A vast majority of Arab migrants suffer from identity crisis, alienation, homesickness, and cultural setbacks, mainly owing to their religion. Ultimately, they take recourse to religion and spirituality and try to identify a few aspects that resonate well with the new cultural practices, and find solace and autonomy in the newly created cultural space. Aboulela, in the present novel, goes a step further and identifies a number of commonalities, or universal values, in world cultures as sharing the common spiritual thread. A few postcolonial scholars find this trend in

Aboulela's fiction disturbing since, to them, it goes against the idea of hybridity and ambivalence that challenge the notion of purity (and thus superiority) of cultures and religions, a Eurocentric notion. To my understanding, Aboulela translates the cultural shock and emotional setbacks the Arab Muslim immigrants face in the West but acquires a conciliatory tone as things have started changing in the West to a large extent. Aboulela's stance in her fictional work is supported by several prominent postcolonial and postmodernist critics, such as Abdelrazek-Alsiefy (2023), Aladylah (2023), Arkhagha and Awad (2021), Englund (2023), and so on, who believe that the era of conflicts of cultures and religions is over, and therefore, a multicultural understanding of issues is the need of the time.

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