

Teaching Leila Aboulela in the context of other authors across cultures: creative writing, the Third Culture Kid phenomenon and Africana womanism

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Born in the Sudanese capital of Khartoum in the 1960's to an Egyptian mother and a Sudanese father, Leila Aboulela moved to the United Kingdom to pursue further studies in Aberdeen, Scotland, where she was part of the UK's one million-plus Muslim community with members hailing from varied backgrounds in the Indian subcontinent, the Middle East, Chechnya, and Africa to mention but a few of the places. She presently lives and works in Doha, Qatar. She is the author of three novels, *The Translator* (1999), *Minaret* (2005), and *Lyrics Alley* (2010), as well as a collection of stories titled *Colored Lights* (2001).

This essay discusses creative writing and critical pedagogical insights gleaned from teaching the aforementioned works by Leila Aboulela in the context of other authors across cultures at the college level in the USA and the UAE, specifically at the University of Missouri-Columbia and the American University of Sharjah. It situates Aboulela's largely transnational fiction in relation to Africana womanism, the third culture kid phenomenon and its use as a tool for religious and cultural competency in an increasingly polarized post 9/11 world. It also addresses Aboulela's transgressive stance against the boundaries of gender, class, race, body-ability, and religion, among other factors, in a colonial and postcolonial setting.

Recent scholarship on Aboulela includes Barbara Cooper's "Everyday objects & translation: Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* and *Colored Lights*" (in Cooper, 2008). Here, Cooper discusses Aboulela's *The Translator* and mainly two stories from the collection *Colored Lights* – "The Museum" and "Colored Lights" – with the view that "Solid objects in Aboulela's fiction speak a coded and concrete language" and that material culture is "fundamental to the texture of life and the loss suffered by those who have to negotiate between diverse identities, religions and tongues" (p. 64). Cooper views Aboulela's emphasis on artifacts, such as those Shadia sees in "The Museum," as a criticism of the British empire and its explorers who only wanted "to benefit themselves" (Aboulela, 2001, p. 117) with Africa's raw materials under the façade of the benefits they purported to bring such as Christianity, commerce and civilization. In this manner, Cooper says, Aboulela "plays with the solid things of everyday life in order to explore the complex web woven around the interface between her different cultures and languages" (p. 63). Further, Cooper sees Aboulela as enacting "the effort of migration by carving out an English that absorbs traces of Arabic and [one that] is infused with Islam" (pp. 44-45). For Cooper, the "language that writers such as Aboulela are crafting has to be malleable in its function of depicting multiple cultures, experiences and spiritualities" (p. 48). Cooper (2009) also discusses the teaching of Aboulela's *The Translator*, with a focus on the immigrant experience.

This paper extends Cooper's work by viewing Aboulela and her fiction not only through a migrant and transnational lens, but also through the aforementioned lenses such as the third culture kid phenomenon and Africana womanism. This paper also shows Aboulela as equally critical of West-East imperialism, such as the British Empire in North Africa as discussed by Cooper, as she is of East-East imperialism and sometimes resultant racism/colorism, such as between Egypt and the Sudan in *Lyrics*

Alley. My reading and teaching of Aboulela's oeuvre takes into account North Africa's writing tradition, which according to scholars such as Talahite (2007) is "part of Arabic literature" and "determined by the sense of belonging to an Arab nation which shares the same language and culture, and to a certain extent, the same religion" (p. 38). However, I also highlight Aboulela's transnational narratives as often loaded with an exilic consciousness where the identity and subjectivity of her protagonists are influenced by Black Africa as much as by the Arab World, as protagonists confront issues of race and colorism in the midst of other intersecting oppressions. Additional recent scholarship on Aboulela includes Philips (2012), Abbas (2011), and Cariello (2009). This essay further broadens our understanding of Aboulela's work by focusing on pedagogical insights gleaned across cultures, an area of study that has yet to receive adequate attention in recent scholarship on the author.

For me, Aboulela is of particular pedagogical interest as a transnational writer, whose works are intriguing both from a creative writing fiction and scholarly perspective. I started reading Aboulela as part of my doctoral studies at the English Department, University of Missouri-Columbia in the United States. In the duration, I also used her work to teach in creative writing fiction classes where I assigned workshop participants in my *English 1510 – Introduction to Fiction* class, spring 2010, a short story titled "Majed" from *Colored Lights*. I thought that Aboulela's short story would bring a transnational, female, Arab-African and Islamic voice to the American classroom, while simultaneously showcasing a literary portrayal of the challenges facing Muslim immigrant students in the West—in this case, Hamid, a student in the UK struggling with his dissertation, blue-collar job dissatisfaction, budding alcoholism, interracial marriage to a white Muslim convert against the wishes of his family in Sudan, and guilt over loving his two biological children (Majed and his three-week baby) more than his two white step children. Apart from the issue of diversity of voice, I envisioned the use of Aboulela's short story as encouraging multi-cultural competence. Indeed, as Jawad and Benn (2003) claim, "There has never been a more important time to listen to the experiences of Muslim women living in the West" (p. 198). Through fiction, Aboulela tries to reveal the multifaceted spiritual and cultural dimensions of her characters in an age when the Islamic faith faces an almost unprecedented challenge from radical extremism within, while from without it is cast as the pariah of all religions.

In addition, I also used "Majed" to demonstrate the use of vertical versus horizontal movement in the short story form. Horizontal movement entails elements such as storyline, plot, and external action, while vertical movement entails aspects such as character development, flash back, flash forward, descriptions, and internal character actions. The theoretical basis for craft elements or techniques in this workshop came from Gardner (1991) and Crews (1999). "The Writer Who Plays with Pain: Harry Crews" particularly resonates with "Majed", where Hamid is plagued by pain and fear, stemming from the specter of past domestic abuse endured by his wife in a previous marriage and racial prejudice which he and his half-white children sometimes suffer from due to racial identification with Black Africa, as shown in the following passage:

When she [his wife] became Muslim she changed her name then left her husband. Robin and Sarah were not Hamid's children. Ruqiyyah had told Hamid horror stories about her previous marriage. She had left little out. When she went on about her ex-husband, Hamid felt shattered. He had never met Gavin (who wanted nothing to do with Ruqiyyah, Robin and Sarah and had never so much as sent them a bean), but that man stalked Hamid's nightmares. Among Hamid's many fears, was the fear of Gavin storming the flat, shaking him until his glasses fell off, "You filthy nigger, *stay away* from my family." (Aboulela, 2001, p. 108)

Pain and fear as fictional themes as well as sources of creativity recurred in documentaries accompanying workshop texts and shed light on writers' emotional lives during workshop discussions.

These accompanying documentaries included *Ernest Hemingway: Rivers to the Sea* (American Masters, 2005), which ends with Hemingway's suicide, and *The Rough South of Harry Crews* (Dir. Gary Hawkins, 1991), which discusses these themes (among others such as sharecropping poor whites and African-American presence) in Crews' life and writing. Additional short stories read in this workshop as a demonstration of various fiction techniques included "Waltzing the Cat" by Pam Houston, "The Summer Before the Summer of Love" by Marly Swick, and Ernest Hemingway's novella *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952).

I also taught *The Translator* (Aboulela, 1999) in *English 2159 – Introduction to World Literatures, 1890 to Present* (Theme: Transnational and Exiled Writers in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa and the Diaspora) in spring 2010 at the University of Missouri-Columbia. The main protagonist in this novel, Sammar, was born in Scotland while her parents (Sudanese nationals) were studying there and holds a British passport. She, her brother (Waleed), and their parents returned to Khartoum when she was seven. It is there that she met her cousins Tarig and Hanan, the children of her paternal aunt, Mahasen. She eventually marries Tarig, but claims that she loved his mother more than she did him. Sammar returns to Scotland once more with Tarig, who is studying medicine, and they have a son called Amir. Tarig dies in a car crash and Mahasen blames Sammar for his death because she believes Sammar pressured him to buy the car in the first place. When Sammar returns to Khartoum to bury Tarig, she agrees to marry Ahmad Ali Yasseen and become his third wife, because she needs a "focus." This makes Mahasen angrier as she sees Sammar as young, educated and able to make a living to support herself and her son despite being widowed. Unable and unwilling to mother Amir, Sammar returns to Aberdeen alone where she lives an ascetic life until a life-changing affair with the Scottish Rae Isles for whom she translates Arabic texts to English. Rae, who spent time in Morocco and Egypt in his younger years, is a twice-divorced Middle-East historian and lecturer in Third World politics at a university in Aberdeen. The novel comes to a close after Sammar's and Rae's wedding.

This course, ENG 2159, examined influential roles played by transnational and exiled writers from the late 19th century to present day in outlining and resisting – through the written word and personal activism – global violence emanating from race and religious difference. In regard to race- and religious-based violence, particular attention was paid to the emergence of the African Diaspora and subsequent imperialism in continental Africa. Participants¹ examined the prevailing global context, history, and nature/psychology of this violence as theorized on a cross-cultural and racial basis in *Frantz Fanon and the Psychology of Oppression* by Hussein Abdilahi Bulhan (1985, 2004) and used it as a lens to examine select works of fiction and nonfiction. Apart from the above novel by Aboulela, these works included select readings from *Southern Horrors and Other Writings: The Anti-Lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892-1900*, edited and introduced by Jacqueline Jones Royster (1997); *Out of Africa and Shadows on the Grass* (1937) by Isak Dinesen; and *The Last Will and Testament of Senhor da Silva Araújo* (1991, trans. 2004) by Germano Almeida. Accompanying documentaries included *Empires – Holy Warriors: Richard the Lion Heart & Saladin* (PBS, 2005), which historicized war and peace in Christian-Muslim relations in the Middle East. Course participants further addressed how race and religious difference, especially between Christians and Moslems, intersected to fuel violence in North Africa and the Western World in the colonial and postcolonial eras. An additional critical lens, which I recommended for the Aboulela reading, was *Muslim Women in the UK and beyond* (Jawad & Benn, 2003). Some of the main concerns discussed in this collection of essays are: Muslim women's rights; social conditions/aspects, including Islamophobia; sex/gender roles; experiences, needs and potential of new Muslim women in Britain; choice, opportunity, and women's careers; and life histories, identities, and citizenship.

When responding to *The Translator*, some UMC students were wary of adopting an unconscious Orientalist gaze and, therefore, hesitant to voice their readings of it. Rae, however, as a Western character who morphs into a cross-cultural and transnational figure, proved inspiring. In an effort to learn about the language and religion of non-Western societies in North Africa, he was seen as very much embodying Fanon's championing of cultural relativism in race relations. In this sense, the students were appreciative of the novel as a literary bridging of the East-West divide and saw it as a cross-cultural learning opportunity, especially after the tragic events of 9/11 in New York City, the London train bombings of 7/7, and the would-be bombings of 21/7. Fanon's views on the effects of structural violence in institutions (prisons, psychiatric hospitals, etc.), the imperial age, and slavery, complicated the analysis of violence in East-West relations as depicted in the novel and problematized the brief position Sammar took translating material from interrogation sessions of imprisoned terrorist suspects in Egypt. Documentaries such as *Empires* (2005) further historicized war/violence and the quest for peace across centuries between the East and the West. Of particular interest in *Empires*, especially in regard to cross-cultural marriage, was Western public outcry against the proposed marriage of Richard's divorced sister, Joanna, to al-Adil, Saladin's brother, in order to secure peace and the position of Christians in Jerusalem. The proposed marriage, which was in pursuit of peace and not love-based, did not take place, but course participants brought it up when discussing the marriage of Rae's uncle to an Egyptian woman, his uncle's subsequent conversion to Islam, and how his family consequently disowned him. The matter of Joanna and al-Adil was also brought up when discussing Sammar and Rae in the context of how much opposition the very idea of a cross-cultural marriage, regardless of whether it was based on war politics or love, generated in the private and public spheres of those involved across time. For example, Rae's family, based on his uncle's case, is not supportive, while Sammar's friend, Yasmin, who is also Rae's secretary, ardently warns her against the relationship saying, "If I were you, I'd avoid him like the plague [...]. Go home and maybe you'll meet someone normal, someone Sudanese like yourself. Mixed couples just don't look right, they irritate everyone" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 93). In addition to such prejudiced views on cross-cultural marriages, the Islamophobia facing Rae and Sammar, individually or as a couple, was a source of concern for course participants. In terms of Jawad and Benn's ideas, social conditions such as Islamophobia could have a negative impact on Sammar's and Rae's potential, careers, and life histories in the West.

However, on another level some UMC course participants were critical of Rae and Sammar's relationship, describing it as a disappointing, juvenile or adolescent-like romance. Sammar was characterized as prudish when she was embarrassed by holding hands with Rae, and some students were disappointed that they did not even kiss. The relationship was criticized for happening too much in the mind and not getting physical. Opposing views were simultaneously raised about Rae getting physical at all since he is a Middle-East historian and should know better, given that he also admires her veiling and Islamic spirituality.

I had also taught Aboulela's *The Translator* in a different class, *English 4420 – Africana Womanism* (Theme: Influential Roots to Contemporary Thought in the Diaspora and Continental Africa) the previous semester, fall 2009 at UMC. The main premise of the course was reading a selection of texts by authors such as Aboulela, Sojourner Truth, and Zora Neale Hurston using an Africana Womanism lens. The eighteen key features of an Africana Womanist discussed were: self-namer; self-definer; family-centered; in concert with males in struggle; flexible role player; whole and authentic; genuine in sisterhood; strong; adaptable; male compatible; respected and recognized; spiritual²; respectful of elders; adaptable; ambitious; and mothering and nurturing (Hudson-Weems, 2004). In the second half of *Africana Womanism*, Hudson-Weems analyzes various novels, including Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*

(1989). Bâ's novel, originally written in French, is set largely in an Islamic society in Senegal. I thought that assigning a different novel where transnationalism is more pronounced, such as Aboulela's, which is originally written in English and set in both an Islamic society in Sudan and a predominantly Christian Scotland, would further broaden the class' understanding of women of African-Arab descent and Islamic sensibilities both in continental Africa and the Diaspora. Select student responses to *The Translator* using an Africana womanist lens coalesced around Sammar. She was either criticized for her "need" of a male "focus" in her life or alternatively lauded as male compatible from an Africana womanist lens. In addition, she was praised for role flexibility, first as wife and mother and then as sole bread winner. Despite her long depression, Sammar was lauded for her physical and psychological strength, qualities of an Africana womanist, but concerns existed over her mothering/nurturing of Amir, who was largely raised by her mother-in-law after Tarig's death. Some students argued that leaving Amir with Mahasen was the right thing to do as she was not in a position to attend to him, while others argued she should have brought him back with her to Scotland and struggled to raise him right through her extended mourning.

After completing my studies at the University of Missouri-Columbia, I accepted a position in the English Department at the American University of Sharjah (AUS) in fall 2010. I found myself teaching Aboulela again, this time around within a Gulf context: a predominantly Muslim, but very diverse workshop in terms of race and nationality compared to previous workshops at the University of Missouri-Columbia that were predominantly white, American by nationality and with a largely Christian sensibility. My spring 2012 workshop, *English 301 – Creative Writing*, at AUS had course participants from the UAE, India, Pakistan, Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, Poland, Canada, and Saudi Arabia to name but a few. A significant number of these workshop participants are what Pollock & van Reken (2009) define as 'third culture kids' (TCKs). Sociologists John and Ruth Useem coined the term 'third culture' in the 1950's while doing research on Americans working in India. The early development of a TCK is shaped by an interstitial culture or a "culture between cultures," that is, between their current host culture or second culture (in this case, the UAE) and that of their parents or home culture (Useem, 1993, p. 1, cited in Pollock & van Reken, 2009, pp. 14-15). Adult TCKs' sense of identity and world view is impacted by their "internationally mobile childhoods" (Pollock & van Reken, 2009, pp. xi-xii). The term TCK has been further redefined as entailing a lifestyle that is " 'created, shared, and learned' by those who are from one culture and are in the process of relating to another" or even more simply to refer to "children who accompany their parents into another society" (personal communication from Ruth Hill Useem, cited in Pollock & van Reken, 2009, pp. 15-17). The term TCK itself falls under the broader category of the cross-cultural kid (CCK), a term coined by Pollock & van Reken (2009) to "include all children who for any reason had grown up deeply interacting with two or more cultural worlds during childhood [up to age 18]" (p. xiii; p. 31).

With the number of expatriates and their children in the UAE exceeding that of locals, inevitably young locals in their developmental years are increasingly steeped in the TCK interstitial culture. As such, local Emirati students in my workshop could also be classified as domestic third culture kids as they are largely "raised in a world between worlds in [their] own country" (Pollock & van Reken, 2009, p. 27).³ Apart from the TCK dynamic, where, for example, there is an Egyptian-American student whose family spends several years in Saudi Arabia before moving to the UAE, intercultural marriages (such as Emirati-Yemeni or Italian-Egyptian) were a significant feature in the family backgrounds of several workshop participants at AUS.

Many participants in the workshops termed Aboulela's fiction – the short story "Majed" and later the novel *Lyrics Alley* – as "very relatable", a sign of the shared TCK experience that marks Aboulela and her

