SUDAN AT CROSSROADS – A POSTCOLONIAL STUDY OF LEILA ABOULELA'S LYRICS ALLEY

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Abstract: English Literature from the Arab world has become popular worldwide only in the late 20th century. This paper attempts to read an Arab-English novel from the postcolonial perspective. Leila Aboulela is a Sudanese writer with a mixed exposure of Arab and the West. Aboulela, a versatile writer on themes like globalization, Islam and migration, has spoken of postcolonial Sudan in Lyrics Alley. The novel captures Sudan in the midst of political and cultural turmoil, at a time when the Whites left their land and self-governance was the talk of the town. This paper views the family of Mahmoud Abouzeid as a microcosm, to study the changes that take over entire Sudan, the macrocosm. The study draws upon the contrasting characters to showcase the uncertainty and quandary that prevailed in the nation.

Keywords: Lyrics Alley, Leila Aboulela, Anglo-Arab novel, Postcolonial Sudan, transitional period, Postcolonial predicament and dilemma, Colonial influence, cultural disparity, political instabilty

The world history records that Great Britain was the single largest imperial power ruling over a quarter of the world by the end of the 19th century. The colonial rule ended at different times across the world in the 20th century. The condition of one country ruling over the other is almost unimaginable in the present day with strong political and administrative concepts of democracy, human rights and International relationship in place. But, like a white cloth stained with colour, the colonized nations have been bearing the tainted spots left behind by the White rulers. The literature of the colonial countries has risen to great heights of resistance, condemnation and sometimes, acceptance and appreciation of the colonial rule. As a discipline of literary studies, postcolonialism emerged in the late 1980s, influenced by the works of Said's Orientalism(1978), Homi Bhabha's Nation and Narration(1980), Helen Tiffin and Bill Ashcroft's The Empire Writes Back(1989). Postcolonialism is a study of a literary work from the perspective of the aftermath of colonization and the effects of colonial oppression. It is inclusive of 'all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day' (Nagarajan, 185). Postcolonialism uses literary works as the medium to unearth the political, economic and social ideologies that were in operation during the colonization, the transformation in effect at various phases after the colonial rule, the response and reaction of the colonized, whether they colluded with the values imposed by the intruders or they resisted and challenged them. Postcolonialism asserts that cultural colonization could not be completely erased and therefore, there has been no complete decolonization. The colonialist ideology created a 'cultural cringe' (Nagarajan, 187) as a result of Eurocentricism, which shaped the colonial subjects to behave in a way instructed by them. The colonized preferred to imitate the West at the cost of their indigenous culture. There is a sense of 'double-consciousness' evident in their thoughts and lifestyle that showcases dual ways of observation and action—one from the colonizer's point of view, another through their native eyes. A sense of incompleteness fills their life which leaves them uprooted from their own soil and yet to be planted on a new land. The literature of this era captures the colonized at the junction of tradition and modernity, native culture and foreign lifestyle. Although some don't suffer identity crisis, they still float in mid-air with either no sense of belongingness or a dual sense of attachment to both old and new. Even in the case of Arab writings in English, we find similar circumstances, predicaments and crisis. The focal areas of Arab women writing can be summed up as follows: Women wrote texts trying to capture a complex, complicated reality burdened by contradictions and anxieties. Women wrote about national struggle, civil war, political and social oppression…relations with men… and their own experience….This confused, often chaotic social reality is reflected in both men and women and their relationships with the self, others, and the surrounding environment (Radwa Ashour, 8). This paper studies Sudan at crossroads as pictured in Leila Aboulela's Lyrics Alley. Scotsman writes about the novel,

> "A tender love story; a family saga, and a portrait of 1950s Sudan teetering in the brink of modernity" (LA, i).

Leila boulela is a writer from the Arab world. Her experience and observations of people in places like Sudan, Egypt, Aberdeen, Scotland and Doha is evident in her strong assertion and bold discourses on people, country and religion. She was awarded the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2000 for her short story "The Museum". All her novels The Translator, Minaret, Lyrics Alley were nominated for the Orange Prize. The Translator was chosen as a Notable Book of the Year by the New York Times in 2006. Her latest novel, Lyrics Alley, was the Fiction Winner of the

Scottish Book Awards and was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers Prize – Europe and South Asia. Geoffrey Nash observes,

"Aboulela's residence in Britain provided her with a subject matter: a terrain against which she could not only set her Sudanese heritage, but which she could employ to encapsulate a new identity: that of the Muslim Arab/African woman in exile" (136).

Although Aboulela had focused on religious predicaments and Islamic individualism as an alternative to cope with the Western modernity imposed on a Muslim migrant, her latest work, Lyrics Alley, draws upon the colonial impact on Sudan, even after the official decolonization. Lyrics Alley is a typical postcolonial work of a writer who is

"Culturally sensitive in the extreme, and bespeaks more than a superficial conversance with post-colonial issues" (Nash, 136).

Aboulela's childhood in Sudan had played a vital role in shaping this novel. Haidar Ibrahim writes that Sudanese Literature is in short supply due to underdeveloped economic conditions, unstable, riotous political conditions and religious conflicts. He observes,

"The overwhelming importance of politics in the life of the general populace has also had a negative impact on art and literature" (162).

But in the recent years, writers like Aboulela have surpassed these challenges and have carved their niche as successful Anglo-Arab writers. Ibrahim refers to Mu'awiya al-Bilal's opinion on the features of modern fiction written by women in 1970s and 80s. They are 1) Use of modern fictional techniques, such as time intersections, stream of consciousness, internal monologue, memory and recall and disruption, 2) a poetic use of language, and 3) women's approach to fiction from subjective experiences and awareness of their independence and individuality to reject the various oppressive forces that seek to control them (174). Aboulela incorporates most of these features in her novels. In Lyrics Alley, Aboulela captures the appropriate moment when the "Sudanese women found themselves in an unspecified transitional state, what Durkheim termed 'anomie.' The old had been displaced, but the modern [had] not yet occupied its place" (Radwa Ashour, 164). Body of the paper Lyrics Alley is a fiction inspired by the author's uncle-poet, Hassan Awad Aboulela's life. Aboulela creates a character Nur, and designs his character and life based on her uncle's. The poet's first poem "Travel is the Cause" triggered the pulse of entire Umdurman. Leila Aboulela felt that the following line from the poem:

"In you Egypt are causes of my injury. And in Sudan my burden and solace",

Ruffled her own Egypt-Sudan dichotomy and a sense of dual identity. Aboulela created a character, Nabilah, who not only represented the era of Anglo-Egyptian rule but also the author's own double heritage. Aboulela shares the following thoughts in an interview: The 1950s was a fascinating and pivotal time in Sudanese history. With British rule coming to an end, the Sudan was at crossroads….it was an Anglo-Egyptian Condominium….I became interested in this era, because my mother is Egyptian and I myself emigrated to Britain, therefore, the three countries that made up my identity – Sudan, Egypt and Britain – were all coming together in this particular setup. (www.leila-aboulela.com) Lyrics Alley is set up at a time when Sudan's diverging ethnic and religious populations collided and the British rule was in its twilight. The country was torn between the modernizing influences and the call of traditional customs. The divide is reflected in the frequent clashes between the opposing forces and the differences evident in them. This paper is an attempt to project the divide through a comparative study of the characters, typical of their mindset and belongingness. An affluent and influential Sudanese family of the Abouzeid dynasty is taken as the microcosm of the entire Sudan experiencing discord and conflicts amidst the uncertainty of shifting powers. New Internationalist praises this work as an evocative description of the struggle between tradition and modernization through a portrait of a family in flux. Soraya and Fatma were sisters, daughters of Idris, Mahmoud Bey's brother. Fatma, the elder of the two was stuck to her tradition and homely responsibilities. She took after her mother-in-law in devoting her life for the family. She had hardly reacted to her father's order, to leave school and marry her cousin, Nassir. She forced herself to thwart her dreams and get contended with whatever came her way. She was least influenced by the West and had never thought of education. Unlike Fatma, Soraya had ambitions. She had fixed goals be it, education or marriage. She was vibrant, intelligent, vigilant and popular at school. She always thought of Egypt as her dreamland of freedom.

"She loved travelling to Egypt and how she didn't have to wear a tobe in Cairo" (LA, 04).

Soraya considered Nabilah her role model. Nabilah was the young Egyptian wife of the business giant, Mahmoud Bey, Soraya's uncle.

"Nabilah's elegant clothes were modeled on the latest European fashions, and the way she held herself was a like a cinema star, with her sweeping hair and formal manners" (LA, 09).

This attitude, as Nagarajan calls Eurocentricism is,

"Raising the European culture as the ultimate standard by which to measure other cultures" (186).

Soraya often expresses such Eurocentric ambitions

against the wishes of her backward father. While Soraya was obsessed with novels, Fatma considered it a waste of time and unsuitable for women. But Fatma never discouraged Soraya's petty modernized desires. Once Idris had caught Soraya wearing glasses, but she retorted in a flat voice,

"These glasses are especially designed for women" (LA, 155).

Soraya's strong ties with her family, especially her father, retained her identity as a Sudanese. But she looked forward for a Westernized living. We can see her faith and hope in the West when she assures Nur of a complete recovery from his paralyzed limbs. She says, "While we are speaking now, a scientist is in America in his laboratory working out a cure for you. I just know it" (LA, 153). She grew up as a typical Sudanese girl, completely in love with her beloved Nur. But after the fatal accident at the beach where Nur had hit himself against a rock while diving into the sea, he was left a quadriplegic. Once Soraya's hope of his recovery waned away, she prepared herself to marry another prospective groom, who was educated in Britain, was progressive and open minded and encouraged her dreams and ambitions of her life. The influence of the West is seen in Soraya's pragmatic and rational decisions regarding her education and marriage. But Soraya could never change herself completely. Nabilah, found Soraya disgusting and irritable with the way she behaved, 'her lack of discipline, gum snapping in her mouth, her hands always moving', and calling her name 'without addressing as Madame, Abla, Hanim or even Aunty' (LA,25). Till the end of the novel Soraya is at crossroads, dreaming to be like the women of the West, but her native attributes still alive. The cultural intersection is prominent in the characteristic differences between Nabilah and Waheeba which generates hostility between the two. Herald writes about Aboulela's style, "...it is in her vivid, beautifully original portrayals of battling wives, Nabilah and Waheeba, that her real genius lies" (LA, i). Waheeba, the first wife, is a Sudanese and resents her husband's favouritism to his second, younger Egyptian wife, Nabilah. Mahmoud Bey's affinity towards the West is the main reason for his second marriage. Bey gave first preference to Nabilah because he believed that she played a main part in his political and social ties to strengthen his business with the Whites. Nabilah was proud of her dynamic husband, but she disliked Sudan and its people.

"For Nabilah, the Sudan was like the bottom of the sea, an exotic wilderness, soporific and away from the momentum of history....Nabilah knew she would adjust, but...[was] too conscious of her status" (LA, 24).

Nabilah took extreme care in bringing up her kids, Ferouk and Ferial, the Anglo-Egyptian way. Naming them after popular Egyptian King and Queen, she home-schooled them through an Egyptian teacher, Ustaz Badr.

"Farouk and Ferial...were the only children in the Abouzeid family who had bedtime stories and a proper decorated nursery, with beds of their own. The Sudanese did not understand about proper modern child-rearing, but she [thought, she] would teach them by example" (LA, 25).

Nabilah had designed her wing of the saraya like a modern, Egyptian home. Waheeba's was a hoash. It was a huge space, with traditional beds lined at the four walls, guests would sit on beds, and angharaibs made of rope, with no privacy. This irritated Nabilah and she thought this a proof that Sudanese had a long way to go from primitiveness to modernity. In Waheeba's hoash, clusters of people gathered with extended fingers around a large table of meals, sitting on the beds. While in Nabilah's quarters, meals were served in the dining room, with knives, forks and serviettes. The affluent Sudanese friends of Bey visited him in Nabilah's quarters and Bey felt proud of his European hospitality. Even when Nur was taken to London for treatment, Bey had asked Nabilah and not Waheeba to accompany them. He had disapproved Waheeba's presence in the London hospital and said,

"London is not a place for her. I will be meeting people there and making new contacts" (LA, 114).

Nabilah gets a better stance to prove her worth. But in contrast, Waheeba gets infuriated by the word 'London'. She says,

"God curse London and London's useless doctors! Did they help us in any way? Sucking our money, the thieves! What was the use of this journey? (LA, 174).

She had hopes on her native doctors who, she believed, could cure the deadliest of diseases by their ancient medicines. But Bey always neglected them as outdated and ineffective. While Nabilah was conscious of her tone and pitch in her conversations, Waheeba was always loud and noisy in her speeches. She considered the Egyptians as intruders who tried to kill the native Sudanese practices and establish the superiority of Anglo-Egyptian customs and tradition. Nabilah is considered as a representative of the intruding culture. Waheeba says aloud,

"We were living well before you came from your country; we had nothing to complain of" (LA, 175).

This sentence explains the anxiety and anger of the natives who's contended lifestyle was disrupted by a new drive to imitate the West. People like Waheeba could never cross the threshold of cultural inheritance and at the same time bear the onslaught of Westernization. They were left shaken at the mass transformation that enveloped their country. The

uneducated women found it difficult to accept the policy of compulsory education to women. They stood in the midst of changes, unable to locate themselves in their own land. Nabilah could not tolerate Bey's indecisiveness in divorcing Waheeba and completely shifting to Cairo. One fine day, she flounced off to live with her mother, with least regrets. She dreamt of a complete Egyptian lifestyle that awaited her. She was ready to divorce Mahmoud Bey and put

"An end to being inferior because she was the second wife and of being superior because she was an Egyptian" (LA, 84).

Nabilah breaks these contradictions with her bold decisions, like the women of the West. Towards the end of the novel, we find Nabilah regretting her decision of divorce. When she received Soraya at her house in Cairo, Nabilah found her changed after marriage. Soraya had wished Nabilah's presence to help her set up the first Egyptian style marriage in Umdurman. Nabilah felt the pinch and her opaque barriers glared at her. She envisioned a meaning in her life in Umdurman had she 'thrived as a role model, as a champion of progress, as a good influence' (LA, 286) to guide the younger ones. Although Nabilah is seen as the major Egyptian influence and intrusion in the Abouzied family, she fails to fulfill her role by the end of the novel. She considered her personal prejudices and racial superiority more important than her role as a significant force in the change that was engulfing the Arab world. In the famous guide to Postcolonial Criticism, The Empire Writes Back, Helen Tiffin and others observe that Post colonial literature follows a periodical division of three phases namely, 'adopt', 'adapt' and 'adept'. In the first phase, 'adopt,' the colonized imitate the European models, supposing them to be universally acclaimed as the best. This phase is an implementation of a Eurocentric discourse which keeps Europe at a higher pedestal than the rest of the world. Mahmoud Bey, the head of the royal Abouzeid family, stands for the paradigm shift in the attitude and lifestyle of Sudan during transition. He adopts the European customs relegating his native beliefs to the rear. Unlike his brother Idris, Bey supported Women's right to education. Soraya could achieve her aims only because of her uncle's support. Against the wishes of Waheeba, Bey had sent Nur for higher education to Victoria College in Egypt to expose him to the English Public School System. He intended to strengthen his ties with the Europeans by multiplying his business deals with them. For these reasons, he preferred to have Nabilah to render hospitality to guests like Mr. and Mrs. Harrisons from Europe. Aboulela describes Bey as,

"The British and Levantine core of Khartoum: cosmopolitan and opportunistic, confident and only recently vulnerable" (LA, 54).

Mahmoud Bey had married Waheeba, older than him in age, out of compulsion. He had never liked her 'nativism,' an extreme adherence to the past, indigenous culture. He mentally associated her with decay and ignorance. He believed that his affluence was due to his modern outlook and lifestyle. His marriage with Nabilah, much younger to him, was the result of this attitude. He called circumcision an act of barbarity. He retorted to Waheeba's insistence by saying, 'its modern talk. We need to stop these old customs, which have no basis in our religion and are unhealthy. Besides, it's against the law" (LA, 47). The novel has clear notes on the uncertainty prevailing due to the change in the Government. Bey, a prospective businessman is seen to have high hopes of change. Although he had developed his family business, Bey was keen on transactions between Sudanese. He hated the English troubling themselves to speak in Arabic and wished his country had its own Government soon. In spite of his heavy reputation and credentials, it was embarrassing to seek a foreigner's financial help at every new venture. Nevertheless, for business reasons, he held them in high esteem. This shows that Mahmoud Bey was not only forward in his thinking, but also humanitarian. His spirited love of modernity should not be mistaken for a wholehearted conversion to the Western way of life. Towards the end, we find

"[t]he ingredients of his life, which he had kept in balance, irrevocably altered. The modern-to-traditional ratio shifted; Nabilah's dining table versus Waheeba's hoash, Cairo's avenues versus the alleys of Umdurman. He had prided himself in harnessing both, in gliding gracefully between both worlds, but now he was faltering; now he was unsure" (LA, 268). Mahmoud Bey was clueless of which path to continue his journey. When Nabilah's efforts to get him out of Umdurman had failed, she left him for good. Her absence had stabbed his mind with conflicting thoughts of future. Towards the end, Bey confirms that he cannot leave Sudan under any circumstances. "Umdurman was where Mahmoud belonged. Here on this bed was where he would one day die…." (LA, 268). Mahmoud had realized that his native ties can never be severed by any influence. His cultural roots can only perish under the native soil, but never pulled out.

Conclusion The life of Mahmoud Bey is an experimental sample to study the life in Sudan during the transitional period characterized by political uncertainty. His decision reflects that Sudan is not ready for a complete transformation. The colonial

rule had given them an exposure and awareness of the world outside. The country is neither completely decolonized, nor deeply conventional. It is at crossroads, trying to embrace hybridity and globalization. This transitional period will always speak of turmoil, struggles, predicaments, conflicts and dilemmas only. True to the statement on Kirkus Reviews the novel showcases Aboulela's talent for connecting political and personal upheaval through rich details and spirited analysis of her complex characters. Abbreviations LA – Lyrics Alley

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