

**ISLAM AS A RHYTHMIC REALITY: IDENTITY, EMOTIONS AND URBAN SPACE IN LEILA ABOULELA'S SHORT FICTION\***

Cristina Riaño Alonso

Universidad de Oviedo

rianoalonsocristina@gmail.com

This paper seeks to examine the relation between identity, emotions and urban space in the fiction of the Sudanese-Scottish writer Leila Aboulela. Focus is placed on the short stories “Souvenirs,” “The Boy from the Kebab Shop,” and “The Museum,” published in her collection *Coloured Lights* (2001). This paper will first of all analyse how the dislocation of the characters is used to tackle issues of the mystification of both the East and the West, alienation, and fear. Secondly, it will interrogate the mutual construction and consumption of the East and the West by concentrating on the social and spatial contrasts offered in the representation of the Sudanese city of Khartoum and the Scottish city of Aberdeen. Thirdly, it will revise how individual and collective bodies and identities are constructed through the work of emotions in the framework of the contact between individuals from an Eastern background in this particular Scottish setting.

**Keywords:** Leila Aboulela, Urban Spaces, Emotions, Identity.

Este artículo busca examinar la relación entre identidad, emociones y espacio urbano en la obra de la escritora sudanesa-escocesa Leila Aboulela. Me concentraré en las historias cortas “Souvenirs,” “The Boy from the Kebab Shop” y “The Museum,” publicadas en la colección *Coloured Lights* (2001). Comenzaré analizando cómo la dislocación de los personajes es utilizada para cuestionar la mutua construcción de Oriente y Occidente, centrándome en los contrastes espaciales y sociales presentes en la representación de

la ciudad sudanesa de Khartoum y la ciudad escocesa de Aberdeen. Por último, me centraré en analizar cómo los cuerpos individuales y colectivos, así como las identidades, se construyen a través del trabajo de las emociones en el marco del contacto entre individuos de origen oriental en el contexto escocés.

**Palabras clave:** Leila Aboulela, Espacios Urbanos, Emociones, Identidad

This paper seeks to examine the relation between identity, emotions and urban space in the fiction of the Sudanese-Scottish writer Leila Aboulela. Born in 1964 in Cairo to an Egyptian mother and Sudanese father, she moved to Sudan at the age of six weeks. She then lived in Khartoum, where she graduated in 1985 with a degree in Economics. In 1987 she moved to London where she was awarded a M. Sc. and an MPhil in Statistics from the London Schools of Economics. She arrived in Aberdeen (Scotland) in 1990 until the year 2000, when she left with her family and lived in Jakarta, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Doha; moving back to Aberdeen in 2012. She has written three novels – *The Translator* (1999), *Minaret* (2004), and *Lyrics Alley* (2010) – and a book of short stories, *Coloured Lights* (first published in 2001). All her novels were long listed for the Orange Prize and her short stories collection was short-listed for the MacMillan Silver PEN award. Moreover *The Translator* was chosen as a “Notable Book of the Year” by *The New York Times* in 2006 and *Lyrics Alley* was Fiction Winner of the Scottish Book Awards and shortlisted for the Commonwealth Prize. This would be relevant to the analysis of the impact of her work, although in this paper I am going to focus only on the short stories “Souvenirs,” “The Boy from the Kebab Shop,” and “The Museum,” first published in 2001 in her collection *Coloured Lights*.

These short stories reflect on the feelings and experiences of a series of either Muslim immigrants or individuals from Muslim heritage living in Scotland. Aboulela benefits from these characters’ dislocation to tackle issues of the mystification of both the East and the West following in many respects Edward Said’s analysis of Western conceptualisations of the East. The Orient is not able to represent

itself, falling subject to the Western discourse which both saturates its field of representation with its own images and impedes the creation of alternative forms of self-expression. As Said contends, the East is only credible when “it had passed through and been made firm by the refining fire of the Orientalist’s work” (1978: 283). This standpoint becomes central in Aboulela’s short story “Souvenirs,” where we are introduced to Ronan K., the British painter living in Khartoum. Yassir, the narrator of this story, has left his natal Khartoum in order to work on an oil rig in Aberdeen. He ends up getting married there, and the plot unfolds during one brief visit home. His wife, Emma, did not want to travel with him, so she asked him to bring her home some photos or paintings that would give her an idea of the life and landscape there. Yassir feels incapable of taking photos of his own private life in Khartoum (of his family, his house). He wants Emma to experience his reality, he is unable to capture in a picture and artistically represent all the emotions that his city evokes in him and that he wants Emma to feel. As he says later on in the story, he wanted Emma to come with him to Africa “so that Africa would move her, startle her, touch her in some irreversible way” (Aboulela 2005a: 25). This is itself also a critique of the Orientalist sense of entitlement to invade the private lives of others to bring something “exotic” back home, “a stimulating or exciting difference, something with which the domestic could be (safely) spiced” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2000: 87). Moreover, it also signals Yassir’s reluctance to represent the East, since his photos would not conform to Western preconceptions. He has to resort to the British painter, symbolically referring to the prevalent imbalance of power. As Said postulated, “the one thing that the Orient could not do is to represent itself” (Said 1978: 283). In this vein, it is remarkable that all the paintings of Khartoum made by Ronan K. show rural scenes, which stand in contrast to the highly-urbanised landscapes crossed by Yassir and his sister during their journey to the painter’s house.

In contrast with this portrayal, the West is discursively over-represented by some of Aboulela’s characters as an attractive cosmopolitan site of progress, an image that is strengthened through the media, as well as by the North American and Eurocentric-oriented discourse of global capitalism. However, through her characters’ experience of British cities, Aboulela questions to what extent the

Western way of life can be more fulfilling and liberating for the individual. This is what happens to Dina's Egyptian mother, Shushu, in "The Boy from the Kebab Shop." Shushu met her husband in Egypt and moved to Aberdeen, where he "lost the charisma that Africa bestows on the white man," (2005b: 56) once he is immersed in the cultural environment where he grew up. On the other hand, Shushu's translocation to the West implies a change in her attitude to the body: she falls subject to a culture of dieting and bodily self-hatred and spends her time lamenting her departure from Egypt while binging on films and documentaries from Nile TV. This way, Aboulela responds to the general assumption that women in the West have a great deal more freedom than in other parts of the world. As Carla Rodríguez noted, Aboulela consistently highlights the fact that Western women are under an "empire of beauty imposed by capitalism and the reification of their bodies" (2011: 128), which has been culturally accepted and passes unnoticed, unlike other forms of oppression for women.

Aboulela criticises the stark differentiation and essentialism of this East/West dichotomy, which coincides with James Clifford's conceptualization of place as "translocal," where culture is a complex articulation of "local and global processes in relational, non-teleological ways" (1997: 7). Understanding place in this way avoids the naïve interpretation of the contact between cultures as the clash of two clearly defined sociocultural entities, while it acknowledges that they are systems, as Clifford points out, "already constituted relationally, entering new relations through historical processes of displacement" (1997: 7). For instance, in another story, "The Museum," Shadia's fiancée is the owner of a 7Up franchise in Khartoum and in "Souvenirs" Yassir buys some paintings from a painter that is also working for the multinational Hilton company in Khartoum. These examples also highlight the social imbalances generated through massive capital flows in the globalized world. Saskia Sassen opposes the dichotomisation of national vs. global, as if they were "two mutually exclusive spaces" (Sassen 2010: 129). Far from being separate realms, global dynamics get territorialized in the structure of cities (Sassen 2010: 126), because many of the resources needed for global economic activities are not hypermobile but require physical infrastructures (Sassen 2010:128). Groups of cities then connect with each other establishing circuits that function as "an infrastructure for

globalization” (Sassen 2009: 5). The 7Up franchise in Khartoum is a good illustration of these global circuits: while the corporate headquarters are located in Plano, Texas, its industries are dispersed all over the world. Furthermore, Sassen contends that while inequality has always existed in cities, we now stand before a new phase of urban development generating “novel types of social and spatial inequality” (Sassen 2009: 3). This is due to the growing differentiation in the cities between high-level and high-profit professionals and low income jobs, resulting in economic and spatial polarization (Sassen 2010: 128). Thus, we can see this stark difference of economic resources captured in the contrast between the half-finished urban outskirts of Khartoum and the expensive and luxurious chain of Hilton hotels, which has at its disposition enough money for refurbishment and is targeted at individuals with far higher incomes.

On the one hand, Aboulela’s diasporic characters have to confront alienation, but on the other, they are asked to be grateful, to accept the treatment that is given to them and surrender to the system of new spaces –and social structures– they inhabit. As such, in the short story “The Museum,” Shadia’s Malaysian friend, Badr, recounts how his windows got smashed by racists, just after Shadia tells us about the glossy University handbook for overseas students which hinted that “they should be grateful, things were worse further south, less ‘hospitable”” (Aboulela 2005c: 89). We have another instance of this issue in “Souvenirs” when Yassir, after establishing a direct relation between his wife and the city (“Emma is Aberdeen” 2005c: 11), feels that he should be thankful to Emma (and, by extension, to Aberdeen, Scotland and the UK) because she agreed to welcome him. Aboulela’s character never explicitly verbalises his feelings concerning the undervaluing of his culture or his wife’s lack of interest in learning about it; he only demands instead some random exoticised and reductive representations of a vaguely imagined East.

Misrepresentation of the East is especially examined in “The Museum,” where the central space, the “Scottish Museum about Africa” acts as a site of imperial power, where the Scottish colonialists from Victorian times are portrayed surrounded with their possessions from Africa, the result of their looting. Shadia is unable to recognize and identify herself with anything, since the museum reflects an

Orientalist view of her home, “Europe’s vision” instead of her reality. It constitutes an effort to fix the colonial discourse, to show an essentialised other by means of tangible objects and photographs. Shadia feels out of place: she is alive and “too modern, too full of mathematics” (2005c: 102), unlike these “dead” symbols, which are not subject to a change of meaning in the spatial context where they are located. Thus, the lasting effects of colonialism hinder cross-cultural exchange. Although Bryan (in contrast to Emma) really wants to know more about Shadia’s experience, the Orientalist legacy is too heavy on them. She is outraged by the lies transmitted by the museum, but also exhausted, too tired to counter these misrepresentations.

Indeed, both Victorian museums and the modern tradition of souvenirs are connected as forms of oversimplification: modern tourists and Victorian colonisers are equated, bringing home what reinforces their idea of what Africa should be. Thus, modern tourists create their own private collections, their personal museums. By bringing attention to this idea, souvenirs in Aboulela’s short stories act specifically to subvert the reduction of the other to a stereotype. They present clichéd images of Europe in order to destabilise this alienating system of representation.

The Scottish city of Aberdeen and the Sudanese city of Khartoum are taken as representatives of these mutually constructed and opposed worlds. These cities are well-known to Aboulela: she grew up in Khartoum and, later in her life, she studied for a master’s degree in Statistics (like Shadia) at the London School of Economics. She finally ended up moving to Aberdeen because of her husband’s work at the oil rigs (like Yassir). Thus, Aberdeen and Khartoum are present not only in her own life story but also in most of her writing, either as the actual urban spaces where the action is developed or as a constant evocation on the part of the characters. Yet, both cities stand in harsh contrast in Aboulela’s representation: Aberdeen is described as cold and grey, and the space where a predominantly individualistic society has been developed; whereas Khartoum stands for warmth, colour, and collective interaction.

The time that regulates these urban spaces is also different: Khartoum possesses a slower rhythm, marked by the *azan* (the Muslim

call to prayer from the mosque), against the generally hectic and dehumanising rhythm of British cities. In this context, Islam is described as “a rhythmic reality, a feasible way of living” (Aboulela 2005b: 57). Religion for Aboulela is the most important element of one’s identity. As she explains, “I can carry [religion] with me wherever I go, whereas the other things can easily be taken away from me.” (Aboulela 2005). Islam and spiritual growth are posited as the solution to the alienation and dislocation that her characters find in Aberdeen. In the chapter “The Affective Politics of Fear” (*The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed, 2004) describes how fear works as an affective economy because it “does not reside positively in a particular object or sign” (64), but “moves”, which implies transformation, adaptability, but also the fact that emotions accumulate over time. Fear, then, works as a collective emotion that opens up past histories of association in order to stick together those bodies considered “fearful” and to construct them as apart from the white body (63).

Instead, faith plays a crucial role in the three short stories. In “The Boy from the Kebab Shop” it is symbolically compared to food. In this story, set in a non-specified Scottish city, Dina meets Kassim at a fund-raising Arabic dinner where he volunteers to cook. Kassim, like Dina, comes from a mixed-family: his father is Moroccan and her mother Scottish. Dina’s mother and her imposing and constraining dieting habits stand in contrast to Kassim’s nourishing and comforting Arabic food. The future with him promises a “succulent mystic life” in contrast to the “peckish unfulfillment of her parent’s home” (Aboulela 2005b: 63). Moreover, we also find in this short story an illustrative scene where Aboulela deals with both the issue of the reification of women’s bodies in the West and faith as a restorative food. When Dina meets Samia, who helps to organise the fund-raising dinner, she witnesses how she breastfeeds her baby. Dina feels repulsed at first because in that situation Samia is far from being like an “antiseptic mum in a television ad for pampers” (Aboulela 2005b: 54). Samia, however, performs this naturally, she feels comfortable with her body in that situation. And her baby, after satiating himself with her mother’s milk, calmly falls asleep. The baby irradiates peace and it stands in contrast to Dina’s emotional instability. She feels unable to mourn the death of her father due to her mother’s contempt towards him as the object of blame for her current situation and therefore

undeserving of mourning. When Kassim goes to her house in order to collect clothes for Kosovo, Dina finds in him the support she needs in order to cry for the first time “freely grieving” away from “her mother’s bitterness, her mother’s opinion of her father” (Aboulela 2005b: 60). Shushu senses “the threat of Kassim” (Aboulela 2005b: 61), the threat to her authority and constraints. In a sense, she seems to anticipate the different and more fulfilling life that her daughter could achieve if only she let Kassim introduce her to his faith. Kassim’s faith has made him stronger, restraining him from falling into “irony or despair” (Aboulela 2005b: 61). He firmly believes that “wrong could be made right, nothing was impossible and things could improve” (Aboulela 2005b: 61). And he wants Dina to believe it too.

In the case of Kassim, he has been introduced to the Muslim faith by the owners of the Kebab shop. Before that, although his father was Moroccan, faith did not play a significant role in his life. When he started taking Judo lessons in the city, away from his suburban home, he made Arab friends, who recognised his name straightaway. He started to feel part of a community. As Chimene Suleyman, a British writer of Turkish heritage, acutely notes in her essay “My Name is my Name” (2016), spirituality and religion need to be located, they belong to the cultures from which they stem. Through Judo and his job at the Kebab shop, Kassim is able to feel that he belongs to a community, he is able to relate and to soak up their faith. Faith is what holds the community together. The city is a space of alienation, displacement and strangement, but Aboulela makes the point that even when you are unable to claim your space in it, nor rely on space to vindicate your identity, you can still rely on religion to build a valid sense of self.

In “The Museum” Aboulela represents her character’s alienation through a parallelism between the sociocultural system of Western cities and those social rules that are not explicitly written down. In order to do so, she focuses on her character’s disorientation when she first arrives in her Satistic classes. She is unable to figure out the system, to understand it and follow it correctly, to keep up with the lessons. She needs the help of a “native” Scottish student and his notes in order to make sense of the system (Rodríguez González 2011: 136). She reflects on how she was not a very committed Muslim when she was living in Khartoum. But, after

arriving in Aberdeen, she started to pray consistently to the point that she now feels naked when she forgets to pray; such is the foundation that faith provides for her. According to Wail Hassan, Aboulela's work fits a new trend called "Muslim immigrant literature." It represents a departure from the traditional secular orientation of other writers of Muslim background where the Islamic faith is contemplated as part of the problem or crisis in cross-cultural encounters, a limitation rather than a liberating and comforting mode of identification and living (2011: 198).

The construction and negotiation of identity by minority ethnic groups constitutes a complex debate in present day Scotland, where multiculturalism occupies a problematic position. Since Romanticism, considered by many political theorists as "the birthplace of modern nationality" (Pittock 2008: 6), the Scots have tried to define what it means to be Scottish. The national question has always been strongly linked to the idea of *Gemeinschaft*, which makes reference to the cultural construction of an 'ideal community' living within a nation. However, as Gina Netto notes, critics have pointed out that racism was not considered a political problem in Scotland, where racialization has been excluded from the political process, since it is England that is seen as the significant other (2008: 51). As Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis contend, race is one way to construct a boundary between "those who can and those who cannot belong to a particular construction of a collectivity or population" (Floya and Yuval-Davis 1992: 1). If we accept the presumption that "a nation's cultural life defines the nation" (Netto 2008: 51), it is crucial that minorities enter the national cultural discourse to increase their representation and claim their space within the nation. However, minority ethnic participation in the arts faces several obstacles in Scotland, especially the lack of core funding (Netto 2008: 57). As we have pointed out in the introduction, Aboulela has achieved public recognition, thus her work is more visible. Although Aboulela shies away from politics, it is indubitable that her writing promotes an opening of Scottish national discourse. We have already discussed the way in which Aboulela artistically deals in her writing with her relation to faith. Having lived in cities in the West as well as cities in the East, she is able to establish a connection with Muslim immigrants currently living in the West. As Aboulela

herself recognized in an interview, “over the years I’m increasingly getting the best reception from young, second-generation Muslims who grew up in the West.” (Chambers 2009: 98). Moreover, in the same interview, she acknowledged that when she gets “appreciated by Muslims themselves, it’s nice, because then it feels that they are saying to me, ‘Yes, you are authentic, you are part of the community, you know what you’re talking about’” (Chambers 2009: 91). As Sara Ahmed described in her book *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, migration is related to the process of “finding our way” through what she called “homing devices” (2006: 9). She characterizes the process of migration as “a process of disorientation and reorientation: As bodies ‘move away’ as well as ‘arrive,’ as they reinhabit spaces” (2006: 9). Western space has allowed Aboulela, as well as her characters, to interpret their faith in a different way. For instance, the author recognises that she first wore hijab when she came to Britain, finding freedom away from her “liberal and left-leaning” friends from University (Chambers 2009: 92). Concerning the bidirectional process that constitutes migration, people in the West also have access to a friendlier interpretation of the Islamic faith and identity through Aboulela’s writing. As was made evident in the introduction, her work has had a great impact among Western book awards and, we can thus deduce, among the Western public. Thus, her stories confront the current mainstream discourses that demonize the Islamic faith and its believers.

In Aboulela’s short stories we can see how the East is depicted as an object of fear. For instance, in “Souvenirs,” when Yassir is asked by his sister Manaal why his wife won’t travel to Khartoum, we read:

‘She has fears,’ he said.

‘What fears?’

‘I don’t know. The sandfly, malaria... Some rubbish like that’” (Aboulela 2001: 20).

We have already discussed how fear, instead of being located in a particular body or space, moves between signs and bodies becoming temporarily attached to them (Ahmed 2004: 64). In this regard, Emma cannot point out exactly what makes Khartoum fearsome for her, she only says that she never hears “anything good about that place”

(Aboulela 2005a: 14). Fear opens up “past histories of association” (Ahmed 2004: 63), which render the object fearful in the present. Orientalist discourse has left a persistent trace in Western thought. Through the perpetuation of stereotypes, we continue to determine and fix meaning onto the East. Fear works to separate and group bodies together. Especially in the aftermath of September 11, Leti Volpp accurately describes how there appeared “a new identity category that groups together persons who appear ‘Middle Eastern, Arab, or Muslim’” (2002: 1.575). Aboulela points to this stereotypical aggrupation of people in her short stories, either subtly, as in “The Boy from the Kebab Shop” when a boy says to Kassim “You people can never get it right” (2005b: 52), or in an explicit manner through the scene in “The Museum”, where, in the cafeteria, the African students, the Turkish, the men from Brunei, Malaysia... sat together as, Aboulela ironically describes it, the “collection from the Third World” (2005c: 88). Thus, faith and subsequent spiritual growth act as mechanisms which conform a fruitful individual identity amid a hostile environment.

To conclude, these short stories offer alternatives to established power relations and cultural hierarchies against an overall negative and pessimistic view of the possibility of actual dialogue between cultures, working towards a more egalitarian share of the global city. They also contribute to opening a dialogue between the Scottish national discourse and the community of Islamic believers that also inhabit the Scottish space, giving them representation and affirming their identity. Aboulela interprets Islamic faith not as an obstacle but as a vehicle to achieve a valid identity for migrants. Particularly for women, in a world that is becoming radicalised by leaps and bounds, we find misogyny increasingly present in the political discourses and ideological agenda of terrorist groups. Consequently, the already difficult and vulnerable position of women is further endangered. Especially in the case of Muslim women, this is closely intermingled and further problematized with issues of race and faith. Aboubela’s stories empower women, as distinct from the mainstream discourse that either demonizes them or portrays them as prisoners of their faith. In Aboulela’s words, her stories portray Islam as “a rhythmic reality, a feasible way of living” (Aboulela 2005b: 57).

## WORKS CITED

- Aboulela, L. 2005 Interview. Accessed: 8 November 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/jun/05/fiction.features2>
- 2005a "Souvenirs". In *Coloured Lights*. Edinburgh: Polygon. 9-26.
- 2005b "The Boy from the Kebab Shop." In *Coloured Lights*. Edinburgh: Polygon. 51-63.
- 2005c "The Museum." In *Coloured Lights*. Edinburgh: Polygon. 87-105.
- Ahmed, S. 2004 "The Affective Politics of Fear." In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- 2006 *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Anthias, F. and N. Yuval-Davis 1992 *racialized boundaries: race, nation, gender, colour and class and the anti-racial struggle*. New York: Routledge.
- Ashcroft, B, G. Griffiths and H. Tiffin 2000 *Post-Colonial Studies. The Key Concepts*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Chambers, C. 2009 "An Interview with Leila Aboulela." *Contemporary Women's Writing*. 3 (1): 86-102.
- Clifford, J. 1997 *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. London: Harvard University Press.
- Hassan, W. S. 2011 "Muslim Immigrant Fiction." *Immigrant Narratives: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Murray, P. ed. 2011 *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Romanticism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Netto, G. 2008 "Multiculturalism in the Devolved Context: Minority Ethnic Negotiation of Identity through Engagement in the Arts in Scotland." *Sociology*. Vol. 42, No. 1: 47-64.
- Rodríguez González, C. 2011 "Faith and Conversion on Foreign Grounds: Urban Translocation in Leila Aboulela's Fiction." In Isabel Carrera Suárez, Emlia Durán Almarza and Alicia Menéndez Tarrazo (eds.), *Reading Transcultural Cities*. Palma: UIB. 127-14.
- Said, E. 1978 *Orientalism. Western Conceptions of the Orient*. London: Penguin.
- Sassen, S. 2009 "Cities in Today's Global Age." *SAIS Review*: 3-34.

- 2010 “The Global City. Introducing a Concept.” In Gary Bridget and Sophie Watson (eds.), *The Blackwell City Reader*. Malden and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell. 126-132.
- Suleyman, C. 2016 “My Name is My Name.” In Nikesh Shukla (ed.), *The Good Immigrant*. London: Unbound.
- Volpp, L. 2002 “The Citizen and the Terrorist.” *UCLA Law Review* 49 (5): 1.575-1.600. Accessed: 15 December 2016. <http://scholarship.law.berkeley.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1514&context=facpubs>