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## Dislocating Narrativity: Hybridity, Culture and Identity in Leila Aboulela's *The Kindness of Enemies*

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### Abstract:

This paper attempts to investigate the representation of diasporic characters in fictional narrative discourse by Anglophone Arab woman writer who lives in Britain namely Leila Aboulela. She seeks to negotiate issues of identity, home, hybridity and culture by dislocating the narrative linearity. These notions are interrogated in her recent novel *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015). It discusses the process of establishing a bridge of coexistence and tolerance amid cultural and religious differences. Moreover, the current paper traces the crisis of identity, particularly when it is difficult to assimilate and acculturate. The novel offers penetrations to construct a transformative transcultural spaces of belonging.

**Keywords:** Identity, Dislocating, Belonging, Hybridity, Coexistence

Many diasporic narratives are reproduced by Anglophone women writers who have negotiated issues of home, cultural identity and hybridity. They try to excavate mosaic spaces by crossing cultural, national and religious boundaries, and break the centering dogma by establishing spaces of tolerance, co-existence, multi-cultural and international understanding. These narratives tend to shatter the conventional and stable norms of narrative structure; narrative that deconstructs the identity of the text and inserts notions of Diaspora, homelessness, displacement and cultural hybridity. In this context, immigrant discourses have experienced a sense of homelessness and fractured subjectivity and have tried to construct a stable subjectivity and transformative transcultural spaces of belonging. Spaces that play a crucial role in an individual inward self-consciousness; they are utilized to express the inner world of emotions, thoughts and subjectivity, then, the object is the transcendence of the inner space. These narratives are now dispersed and relocated by Arab women Diasporic novelists such as Leila Aboulela. Indeed, Aboulela's writings deconstruct signs of centrality and compose juxtaposed mosaics of multiple cultures and micro narratives to construct a general human knowledge and experience drowning in the sea of tolerance, inclusion and acceptance.

Leila Aboulela's *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015) is a well-written novel, intellectual, imaginative and creative. It demonstrates clear-cut meandering spectrums of narrative experimentations that have become important approaches in contemporary Diasporic novel. The attracted totem of her novel is the imaginative and innovative matrix of inlaying diverse techniques. Aboulela has not been trussed to one narrative style, that she has pruned the concatenate narrative of its orthodox forms and infused it with tergiversation of Anglophone literature. Additionally, she has shadowed it with spaces of reality and their representations in the act of narration. The power of her novel arises from its experiment with narrative limits, that of the relationship between human perception and narrative. The stories within this novel dramatize the ways in which human subjects make experience intelligible through the storytelling process, activities mirrored by the narrators and characters in their struggle to bring the novel into being as narrative edifice.

*The Kindness of Enemies* contains two different ages, i.e., 19th-century, twenty-first century and stories that are self-consciously woven into the narrative; they are synthesized through the act of narration. This amalgamation is a journey of space across ages and continents, explores new spaces of discourse; spaces raise questions of home, religion and identity. Moreover, this juxtaposition creates new methods of discourse and paves for a reasonable and rational understanding of Jihad and terrorism. *The Kindness of Enemies* deals with the predicament of identity and the requirement to feel of inclusion and secure in a space of alienation and dislocation. Hall states, "this loss of a stable "sense of self" is

sometimes called the dislocation or de-centering of the subject. This set of double displacements - de-centering individuals both from their place in the social and cultural world, and from themselves - constitutes a "crisis of identity" for the individual." (Hall, 1996, 597) In this regard, identity enters a zone of multiple ambivalences, moves into many ideological, theological, cultural and psychological crises. It swims in all the directions without having a unified and coherent direction, becomes variable, transformed and movable.

*The Kindness of Enemies*, is a well-written, marvelously constructed novel that is packed with different time frames and stories, they are amalgamated in one spatial discourse, not disconnected, but narrated simultaneously. Aboulela has deciphered the linearity of time as the causal and temporal connectives which are suppressed but the coherence of the narrative is maintained through the portrait of individuals and the tableaux of cultures and identities. Aboulela has defamiliarized the narrative technique by constant shift in time from the past to the present and by using parallel chapters. She has constructed the paratactic juxtaposition (fragmentation) of narrators in a series of concentric circles in which the disrupted order of sequence is demonstrated by the dates in the chapters' headings and the simultaneous development. Moreover, the recuperating of the detritus of the past in the present causes the recovered past to argumentatively interact with the present. This juxtaposition welds discrete, fragmented and static images of the past and the present to be perceived simultaneously. Mercier states that "To telescope time so that we see everything at once instead of in succession, to convert narration in time into a picture in space." (Mercier 1971, 277) Furthermore, the synthesis and emulsion of two different ages and stories seek to achieve integration, homologation and placement. It is, therefore, in this sense that the two ages and stories become a narrative space and a foundation or a model by such a dislocation of narrativity. However, Aboulela questions the alienation and the fragmentation or schizophrenia of the diasporic identity.

In this narrative, the novel is divided into two parts that takes place in geographically different locals: Scotland, London, Khartoum, Akhulgo, Georgia, Petersburg, Dargo, Warsaw, and Makkah. The first part is narrated in the first person narrator in simple past. The narrator tells the story of the protagonist Natasha Hussein, a Professor of history who studies 19th-century Muslim leader Imam Shamil's leadership from 1830 to 1859 and his fighting for the freedom of Caucasus. The protagonist arrived to London in 1990; her father was a Sudanese and her mother was Russian. She came to Malak Raj house and saw the sword of Imam Shamil, she met her son Osama (Oz), and her research interest was the "Jihad as Resistance-Russian Imperial Expansion and Insurrection in the Caucasus." (Aboulela 2015, 5) Natasha is interested in being in London to inhabit the present, but is desperate because "many Muslims in Britain

wished that no one knew they were Muslims. They would change their names if they could and dissolve into the mainstream, for it was not enough for them to openly condemn 9/11 and 7/7.”(Aboulela2015,6)Aboulela opens up an dilemma of identity that carries religious implication in the western culture, where she leads to a sense of alienation and separation from the host culture. This sheds light on the religious cleavage and misconception of Jihad and its relation with terrorism “Ever since 9/11, jihad has become synonymous with terrorism.” (Aboulela2015,8)The question of Jihad recently becomes a dialectical issue as its essence has been manipulated for the sake of terrorism. Jihad is a spiritual struggle for the defense of one’s country, religion, self and identity. It is for protection against aggression, “Every fight Shamil fought was on the defense. He was protecting his villages against Russian attack.” (Aboulela2015,8)Aboulela gives an insight into a religious problem that migrants face in a host culture. She tries to clarify the concept of Jihad, particularly after 9/11 and creates a spiritual understanding of it. Jihad is distorted for political and religious purposes; therefore, “not every Muslim war is a Jihad. Not suicide bombers or attacking civilians.... Muslims should not use the word “jihad” and Christians shouldn't use the word crusade. “ (Aboulela2015,8)In this regard, Aboulela strives to defeat the ideology of terrorism in the name of Jihad and Crusade and how they are manipulated for political gains.

The second story is told in the third person narrator in a chronological order, beginning in 1839, is interesting because of its relation to the first story. Thus, there is a parallel between the situations and the characters of the two stories, resulting in a new reality created by the welding and transformation of a number of old realities. The narrator goes on to describe events leading up to the abduction of Shamil's son Jamaledin by the Russians in Akhulgo after a dreadful battle “Jamaledin was leaving Dagestan. He was no longer a hostage now; he was kidnapped away from his father's territory. On to the misty unknown, to the city of the Tsar himself, St Petersburg.” (Aboulela2015,28)Shamil begins his search of his son, Jamaledin is taken away of his own space into newness. Bhabha claims “the borderline work of culture demands and encounter with “newness” that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new.”(Bhabha1994, 31) His long journey into space of hybridity is a voyage of discovery, a process of identity formation. He will enter into a dominant culture with its openness and cultural differences. Thus, breaking narrative boundaries creates an amalgamation or hybridization of multi-racial and multi-cultural interaction.

The first section of the novel offers a brief account of a journey undertaken by Natasha Hussein, who travels through Scotland, London and Khartoum. She experiences cultural differences; however, feels frustrated and sees her divided, fractured and liminal self-unable to assimilate and negotiate. Hall argues “identities are never unified and, in late modern times,

increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation."(Hall 1996, 4) In this context, Natasha does not know where she belongs "the two sides of me that were slammed together against their will, that refused to mix. I was a failed hybrid, made up of unalloyed selves. My Russian mother who regretted marrying my Sudanese father. My African father who came to hate his white wife. My atheist mother who blotted out my Muslim heritage. My Arab father who gave me up to Europe without a fight .I was a freak." (Aboulela2015,40) In this perspective, the identity of Natasha is framed of two axes, the axe of rootlessness, instability and without horizon. On the other hand, the axe of difference in religion, origin and culture. These traumatic struggles play a significant role in the psychology and consciousness of our protagonist. "I was not brought up Muslim even though we lived in a Muslim country." (Aboulela 2015, 42) Thus, Natasha lived a secular liberal life in Sudan. She underwent a feeling of not belonging and fragmentation .Moreover, she experienced a loss of religious and cultural identity, even though, religion and culture are interrelated and mingled. "Those were the years when I had hope of fitting in. Then, awkwardness became my home." (Aboulela2015,42)

At the same time, Jamaledin reached Petersburg; he was exhausted from the assault of newness and openness. He met new people, heard different speech, ate food not being food and excavated a space, completely different in religion and culture. The Tsar decided to acculturate his familial, cultural, linguistic, geographical, or even religious roots. Moreover, they centered on the transformation of culture and identity and created a problematized hybrid identity within a son living in Petersburg. Bhabha argues:

"The...hybrid is not only double-voiced and double-accented ... but is also double-linguaged; for in it there are not only (and not even so much) two individual consciousnesses, two voices, two accents, as there are [doublings of] socio-linguistic, consciousnesses, two epochs ... that come together and consciously fight it out on the territory of the utterance ... It is the collision between differing points of view on the world that are embedded in these forms ... such unconscious hybrids have been at the same time profoundly productive historically: they are pregnant with potential for new world views, with new 'internal forms' for perceiving the world in words."(Bhabha1996,58)

In this regard, this hybrid identity generates complexities and ambivalent feelings of not knowing where one belongs. Consequently, this displacement rises conflicts within Jamaledin's religious and cultural belongings and submits to the assimilative demands of secular Russia that he will be transformed, despite differences. Thus, the transformation of the

Russian way of life has to tackle a traumatizing conflict that resulted from the hyphenated identities. "You will bring enlightenment to your own people. For this I have fashioned you." (Aboulela2015, 126)

Throughout the journey of Natasha, she traveled to Scotland to complete her research about Shamil's resistance and his jihad for the liberation of his country against the Tsar occupation. Her mother married Tony, died in Russia. Her father was in Sudan and he had kidney failure. It appears that she finds herself sandwiched in two cultures and suffers from sense of loss- loss of identity and home - consciously or unconsciously. She has the urge to escape from her situation, feels isolated, longs to escape to the outer space, indulges in the maze of nothingness and emptiness and wanders through the labyrinth of spaces." But where to go? To go back to Malak and see the vacuum OZ left behind. To fly to Sudan and sit at my father's deathbed? Instead I went into town because I needed to be surrounded by people, by normal life." (Aboulela2015,134) In this vein, she seeks change, renewal and transformation in behavior and thought "No matter how much I changed when I came to Britain." (Aboulela2015,139) This infusion is seen as a forming part of her identity, and does not uphold any tendencies for radicalization, terrorist attack and aggressive Jihadist movements in the name of Islam. Thus, her journey is a spiritual revolution, which strives for oneness and seeks for radical self-realization. The idea of spiritual revolution is departure from fractured and shattered self and arrival at unified and stable self. This overlap of multiple spaces achieves a new self and identity that give her space in the humane sense. Moreover, it constructs a paradigm that does not resist assimilation, searches for identity and quests for coexistence and acculturation.

Leila Aboulela tries to unlock the secret of cultural space that is the 19th century space of Jihad and resistance. Shamil tries to live through the general trauma of the 19th century age, by taking it through; he strives towards the liberation of Caucas's people of the Tsar. His jihad is based upon legislative stand that is defending his country and people. Shamil represents the moderate Islam free of hatred, extremism, terrorism, fundamental and radical thoughts and movements, creates spaces of coexistence, tolerance and generates a mutual language between different religions and cultures based upon the divine love "We worship the same God." (Aboulela2015,150) Thus, Hall regards that "our cultural identities, in any finished form, lie ahead of us. We are always in the process of cultural formation. Culture is not a matter of ontology, of being, but of becoming." (Hall 1998, 16) In effect, cultural identity dismantles and deconstructs blanket and inaccurate stereotypes and portrayals inherent in such generalized concepts, as Islam is the religion of hatred and terrorism. In addition, Aboulela generates a mutation away from the conventions, dogmas, and organized religious morality into liberated, humanistic and realistic religious context. In a similar vein, Aboulela associates Natasha

Hussein with twenty-first century, PhD student, searching the life of Shamil. Natasha is torn between two identities, rootlessness and unbelonging, stands lonely and forlornly, feels alienated wants to escape the loneliness of selfhood, in particular, when the police accuses Oz (Osama) - a student at the university where she teaches- of terrorism. His arrest is due to downloading radical Islamist material and his name Osama. Natasha starts to feel insecure and rootless about her identity and belonging in a different space, because of culture and religious differences." Ayearning for an identifiable place where I could belong." (Aboulela2015,289)

Jamaledin was released after paying the ransom and freeing Anna, a Georgian princess was kidnapped by Shamil to exchange for his son. Jamaledin who started to forget his past, language, religion and culture. He did not remember his childhood, his mother's name, and his martyred uncle. He needed a translator, because the Avar's language let him down. The Russians have intended to transform the identity of Jamaledin for cultural and political purposes "I hope you will be a bridge between the two sides." (Aboulela2015,237) He is civilized and modernized, knows railway stations, communications, paved roads, sanitations and telescopes. He speaks of peace and Russia and they speak of resistance and jihad. Jamaledin was dislocated in an alien culture. Hence, he could not experience and negotiate the cultural differences between the two sides, so it gave him a feeling of frustration, alienation, and delirium." Here, he was between one dress and the other, neither Russian nor Chechen, just naked and human." (Aboulela2015,240) Therefore, this doubleness problematizes the identity of Jamaledin, as he experiences spiritual fragmentation and loss of identity. In all his years in Russia, he is not forced to convert his religion, he has faith in Islam, but does not practice it "Islam in his mind stood the bolder of the two, more refined and complex." (Aboulela2015,259) This difference cripples and deforms the formation of his identity; identity that is not organized in a straight fixed line, Hall states that "cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all." (Hall1990,5) Jamaledin has a plural personality. He operates in transformative and pluralist modes; he does not reject and resist acculturation and assimilation. Moreover, his hybridity constitutes a bridge between cultural boundaries and differences. As Gomez-Peña states that "home is always somewhere else. Home is both 'here' and 'there' or somewhere in between. Sometimes it is nowhere" (Gomez-Peña1996,5)

Aboulela combines two stories in one comprehensive narrative structure to create an idiosyncratic linguistic hybridity where the referent remains historical and the signifiers point to the twenty-first -century. Aboulela uses time to great effect, clashing past with present across centuries or across characters' memories. In effect, the critical parallel between past and present; in other words, the third-person objectivity and first-person subjectivity of the narrative, is the first and foremost result of a mixture of temporalities. Aboulela welds and juxtaposes the past with the present to rejuvenate the past, and tries to explain the present. Aboulela addresses

cultural, religious and political trends of the present as with providing an objective depiction of the past. She simply deploys the texts of the past as historical referent, permeated in self-reflexive textuality. She wants to drive the reader to a specific, real, historical context, which the world of fiction generates, however, critically. This intertextual orientation illuminates the historical knowledge, attests the unflagging desire for knowledge of the past. The protagonists are free to shape, and form their lives as they like. This realization of personal freedom brings about their assimilation or hybridity through displacing and annihilating of time into spatial categories. Aboulela's absorption of history and fiction may account for the tendency to enter the tunnel of time in order to recover the other, the suppressed, and the esoteric. She did not intend to copy but to recontextualise, to synthesize and to rework.

In conclusion, Leila Aboulela's intention in writing a deconstructive novel is to fill the void and bridge the gap between various cultural, religious and political differences. These differences can fit together and construct a bridge of recognition and integration that negate all forms of differences and can easily coexist. Shenkar opines that "cultures can be "bridged" but not infringed upon or overshadowed, nor can they threaten or be threatened." (Shenkar 2008, 909) As a literary narrative, *Kindness of Enemies* negotiates the construction and formation of identity and belonging derived from hybridity. The protagonist Natasha opens up a space of belonging irrespective of factors resulting from dislocation and fragmentation. She strives to assimilate and longs for a place she calls home "I came so that I would not be an outcast, so that I would, even in a small way, faintly, marginally, tentatively, belong." (Aboulela 2015, 290) Her journey to Sudan gives her a spiritual relief and guide; it changes her. She values the sense of belonging it gives her. Moreover, she is not an isolated member, but simply she wanders in different spaces, searching for home and certainty, "I was confident that there was a home, there, ahead of me." (Aboulela 2015, 305)

Leila Aboulela frames her novel with a new style, juxtaposes and amalgamates multiple images and portraits at once. She presents the past and the present critically, and doesn't widen the gap between the two ages. Joseph Frank states that, "All maintain a continual juxtaposition between aspects of the past and the present so that both (past and present) are fused in one comprehensive view." (Frank 1963, 59) This narrative strategy consists of a package of fragments, each with its own point of view, blurring the boundaries of the context and setting. Aboulela dislocates the protagonists and the narrative structure as well. This dislocation reveals the conceptions of home and identity and how this hybrid identity is generated through cross-cultural adaptation and acculturation. Moreover, Hybridization is a way of bridging different cultures and thus, a way of tolerance and coexistence. Hall regards that "our cultural identities, in any finished form, lie ahead of us. We are always in the process of cultural formation. Culture is not a matter of ontology, of being, but of becoming." (Hall 1990, 225)

**الملخص**

**خلع السرد: التهجين والثقافة والهوية  
في ليلي أبو العلا ، لطف الأعداء  
ماجد العضائية**

تحاول هذه الأوراق البحث في تمثيل شخصيات الشتات في الخطاب القصصي الخيالي للكاتبة العربية الأنجليكانية التي تعيش في بريطانيا وهي ليلي أبوليلة. إنها تسعى للنفاوض على قضايا الهوية والمنزل والتهجين والثقافة من خلال خلع الخطية السردية. تم استجواب هذه المفاهيم في روايتها الأخيرة "لطف الأعداء" (٢٠١٥). تناقش عملية إنشاء جسر للتعايش والتسامح وسط خلافات ثقافية ودينية ، علاوة على ذلك ، تتعقب الورقة الحالية أزمة الهوية ، لا سيما عندما يكون من الصعب استيعابها وثقافتها. تقدم الرواية اختراقات لبناء مساحات تحويلية ثقافية من الانتماء.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الهوية ، الخلع ، الانتماء ، التهجين ، التعايش

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