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**Confronting stereotypes and seeking for
fulfilment in the hostland: an analysis of Muslim
female characters in Aboulela's *Elsewhere,
Home***

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Abstract

The displacement that migration entails is a challenging issue to overcome, especially when a cultural clash between communities is notable. The lack of belonging and the confrontation of stereotypes are impediments to take into consideration when it comes to subsistence in a foreign context. This dissertation focuses on the action of representative female characters in Aboulela's *Elsewhere, Home* (2018), going through their different but parallel lives in a diasporic context. How they deal with the stereotypes concerning Arab and Muslim cultures will be relevant for their study both as individuals and as part of a community, as well as their cultural heritage, their beauty routines and the practice of their faith. This paper particularly intends to analyse their pursuit of personal fulfilment in an in-between scene and how all the previous factors condition their quest, to prove whether a development of self-growth and full-agency eventually play a major role in maintaining their identity.

Key words: hostland, female Muslim practices, stereotypes, agency, self-growth

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From the Western perspective, Muslim countries have been mostly represented as very conservative and close-minded, making evident the gap between both worlds. Aboulela powerfully depicts “the potential for Muslim women to delimit [these] boundaries of post-colonial discourse according to their own terms” (Nash 2002, 31). She provides us with a series of crude and realistic narrations that bring to light the important paper of women for the maintenance of their culture in a new environment full of prejudices. Focusing on their action in the stories, my aim is precisely to analyse this inclusion, maintenance and revival of their culture in the presence of a more powerful one in the hostland.

Leila Aboulela (1964 -) is a Muslim writer that was born in Egypt, but that actually grew up in Khartoum, Sudan (Chambers 2011, 97). She writes stories set in the different places she has visited, most of which take place in Aberdeen, Scotland. Her home country and Egypt are also central settings in her writings, for being places she feels an especial attachment to. Aboulela does not write strictly for women, but she is aware that her stories attract a more feminine readership due to some of the aspects she englobes (Chambers 2011, 113). Muslim immigrant women may find connections between their own experiences and the ones she reflects in her books, feeling at some point even understood. Through accounts of Muslim immigrants in Britain, the portrayal of Aboulela’s female characters becomes of special interest in her latest collection *Everywhere, Home*, published in 2018. The author collects the stories of women coming from similar, but different backgrounds: from women moving because of economic issues, to women that decide to start or continue a love story away from home. For them, diaspora implies movement, but also continuity, most of the times in the pursue of their final prosperity in an alien world. For the purpose of this paper, I will be ignoring those stories that do not sufficiently reflect on the issues under concern¹, while focusing on those women that are more representative. The few cases in which men are mentioned will seek to explain any important interaction with the females being analysed, as these could be interesting, for instance, in connection to gender relations.

The Oxford English dictionary defines ‘diaspora’ as “the dispersion or spread of any people from their original homeland” (Soanes and Stevenson 2006, 397). These days, ‘diaspora’ is understood at the same time either as a forced abandonment of the land, or as a voluntary journey in which there is no trauma or concern associated with it (Kafle 2010, 139). From its origins, the term has evolved semantically speaking, but always

¹ All stories but the following ones are included in the analysis: “Farida’s Eyes”, “The Boy from the Kebab Shop”, “Expecting to Give” and “The Aromatherapist’s Husband”.

entailing this idea of separation from the country of origin. “Home is not a place that one leaves behind, but a geological point of reference, a sense of place which serves as an anchor for the travel” (Voicu 2013, 174). The migrant feels secure knowing that there is a safe place where he can always go back to and this is many times the necessary stimulus to keep struggling far from home.

At the same time, “diaspora scholars redefine diasporas as imagined communities” that share a set of characteristics that make them feel united, such as “origin, identity and fate beyond geographical distance” (Kafle 2010, 145), as feeling equal to a group of people gives them the confidence and strength to continue building a better life in the new setting. The female voices in Aboulela’s work seek for this belonging and collectiveness, as it is not only a matter of place, but of communion with that place, of knowing they belong somewhere else in case the homeland is far beyond reach. “[M]igrant women's emotional reactions are rooted in bodily processes, such as feelings of homesickness” (Safia 2013, 12) that they get to overcome by establishing links with Muslim companions in the new context. In “The Museum”, our protagonist Shadia finds relief in her Eastern companions when she enters the University in Aberdeen. The narrative voice connects the idea of “collective fear” with its “euphoria” (Aboulela 2018, 159), which very well reflects how the anxiety of feeling apart can find alleviation when it is shared among equals. As Heidi Safia says, “the shared identification of race, class and gender is embodied and lived out through a collective consciousness and memory” (2013, 12), which confirms Shadia’s imperative need for commonality to feel like at home. Also, while the word ‘homesick’ does not exist in Arabic as such, it would have been translated as “‘yearning the homeland’ or the ‘sorrow of alienation’” (Aboulela 2018, 148). For the female protagonist in “Coloured Lights”, feeling homesick and alienated are common feelings she has been carrying for most of her life: she is currently working in London, separated from her husband in Western Asia and her daughters in Khartoum, and in the past she was also separated from her brother when he died due to an electrical fault. The Christmas lights in the story remind her of her brother’s death and the only thing that would distract her would be the possibility of belonging again somewhere or feeling attached to someone in London, even if it was just by seeing a “familiar face amidst the alien darkness and cold” of the city (Aboulela 2018, 156).

Apart from these links among equals, some characters also show themselves keen on attaching to the British people, proving that it is possible a coexistence between cultures in a natural way. Shadia’s (“The Museum”) young age and predisposition to fit

in society probably explain together her positive outlook towards socialisation in the West. Everything is new to her in Britain and Bryan is not an exception, “his silver earring was the strangeness of the West, another culture shock” to add to the list (Aboulela 2018, 157). Despite her shyness and fear to the unknown she shows courage and establishes contact with Bryan, becoming a fair representative of Aboulela’s trope of the born fighter, vital and willing to success. An encounter between cultures becomes inevitable, establishing a connection that “emphasizes the intercultural interaction that takes place within [the] spaces of interaction and exchange” (Voicu 2013, 174). This female dynamism in terms of communication is a tool they use to keep their culture alive, resisting to its demise and shadowing per part of the prominent culture in the West. They need to learn to establish a communion between both worlds, mostly for their acceptance in society and tranquillity.

The authority of stereotypes and the Muslim female

Some stereotypes are so strongly entrenched in certain cultures that providing a neutral judgement and ignoring them becomes a challenge, especially when it comes to issues regarding gender, religion and race. By stereotyping, one is therefore placing boundaries: people might assume their membership to a community only because they share a set of ideas that make them both equal to a group of people and different to others. However, this is not only a matter of labelling and drawing lines in between groups, but these ideas are many times the basis of racist behaviours.

Stereotypes have such a rooted nature because they have been imposed by powerful voices. Some are the critics that condemn Said’s *Orientalism* for having contributed to the “othering” of Islam, positioning it as “a historic enemy” from a Western gaze (Nash 2012, 15). But this enmity dates back to Middle ages, and later on to the Enlightenment period, “when Europe distinguished itself from others [...]; it imposed its definition on the non-European world to the east and south, branding a variety of native cultures and political systems as “Muslim” or “Islamic”, while reserving the term “Europe” or “the West” to itself [...]. Islam acquired a reputation for irrationality, fanaticism and extremism” that positioned Europeans in a higher and more civilised position (Talhami 2004, 154). This explains why, throughout history, the events and voices that have been listened to possess a Western outlook, having silenced Muslim countries and labelled them as dangerous.

Writing back to colonial discourses, “Aboulela adopts a subtle transgressive discourse which engages Orientalist and postcolonial tropes in such a way as to project herself” as maverick with respect to “the stale Orientalist discourse of much western writing on Islam” (Nash 2012, 45). She also makes an attempt to break down the clichés built around Sudan, portraying it “as ‘a valid place’ in her writing” (Chambers 2011, 98), and so do her characters. Once they move to Britain, they are able to establish comparisons between the homeland and the hostland with regards to the living standard. In this aspect, and despite the evident disadvantage of the homeland with respect to Britain, they show a sense of longing to all what they have left behind: “I would know that I was part of this harmony, that I needed no permission to belong” – Samra complains in “The Ostrich” when she visits her beloved Sudan (Aboulela 2018, 95-96). She shows an eagerness to belong to a humble community where there is no room for the excesses of the West. This lack of belonging in the hostland only multiplies the positive references to the homeland, proving at the same time that there is no need for abundance where you can find plainness, affection and a community to which belong. However, Sudanese Samra does not show the same admiration her country in “Something Old, Something New”, which is a clear indicative of the sovereignty of stereotypes. Her fiancé converts into Islam so that they can marry, but “[s]he couldn’t really understand why anyone would want to join the wretched of the world” (Aboulela 2018, 29). The Western perspective she has been taught, which makes her think of her culture as weak and miserable, would explain her confusion towards his conversion.

Shadia in “The Museum”, is also concerned about the reality she encounters in the West, which has little to do with the ‘truth’ she has been exposed to. Just as Emma, from British origins, believes what she is told about the ‘dangerous’ Africa in “Souvenirs”, Shadia does about Scotland, where she expects to get rid of her curly hair and get it ‘magically’ straightened: “[w]hen she ran it would fly behind her; if she bent her head down it would fall over like silk” (Aboulela 2018, 158). Such an exaggerate idealisation is based on ideas that project Scotland as an idyllic “Paradise”. When she eventually visits the museum, she feels her heart grieved: “[n]othing was of her, nothing belonged to her life at home, what she missed. Here was Europe’s vision, the clichés about Africa: cold and old” (Aboulela 2018, 177). Africa turns to be a negative representation of a land she does not recognise as hers and realises that the stereotypes actually work from a Western perspective. “She had come to this museum expecting sunlight and photographs of the Nile, something to appease her homesickness, a comfort, a message. But the messages

were not for her, not for anyone like her” (Aboulela 2018, 178), only for a Western public that could not recognise real Africa; a mere display of evidences about the African colonisation from the colonisers gaze. For her British friend Bryan, by contrast, “[t]he imperialists who had humiliated her history were heroes in his eyes” (Aboulela 2018, 179). This shows the power of the single story and to what extent people’s minds can be tampered with information that may be biased. It does not imply that this single version of the events is wrong, but it may be incomplete and lack some important information that is only available in the voices of the ignored minorities.

When we think about a specific culture or religion, the feminine figure is usually the representative gender. Their physical appearance and the adornments they wear, as well as the implicit symbolism of the latter are key aspects to acknowledge. To these are added their beauty habits and their helpful attitude as a caregiver of the family. Especially in Muslim cultures, these features are even more evident when compared to their male companions. For instance, in the case of Sudan, “[w]hile men also perform Sudanese identity through dress and comportment, it seems clear that publicly acknowledged racial coding is the primary responsibility of Sudanese women” (Fábos 2012, 221). This is why we could consider women as the embodiment of their culture, for being the vivid representation of it in many aspects: from the physical traits and their daily habits, to the considerable weight they carry in the family.

At first, it may seem to the reader that the kind of woman we are about to meet is pretty much that of the conventional Muslim female who seeks to marry at a relatively young age and that devotes her life to her husband and children. As Talhami affirms, “[m]ost of the arguments about and perceptions of Islam today invariably affect women” (2004, 155) and proof of those assumptions are the stories that we, as Western people, have been transmitted through time. A good amount of texts written from the 90s also represent Muslims “largely in terms of female-disabling, fanatical and [with] aggressive characteristics” (Nash 2012, 26). In contrast, Aboulela and other contemporaries, whose works are considered to be part of the “neo-muslim writing [...], re-write traditional, ethnic views of Islam and Muslims in terms of a twenty-first century global Islam” (Nash 2012, 26), which gives more space for the female characters to develop and prove their validity both within the familiar unit and in society. In this journey towards acceptance, we meet women that have very much to teach to the audience, women that do not only question their existence and eventually corroborate their identity as Muslim, but that also find in this process a stronger and more capable self. To this effect, Leila Aboulela

“critically rewrite[s] patriarchal language that negatively associates Arab women with either eroticism or unsexed reproduction,” proving that “women can be retranslated in terms of intellectual and psychological maturity rather than mere erotic and physical sexuality” (Wahab 2014, 237). Instead of focusing on their physical attributes, Aboulela’s “feminist tropes” possess features that have been always ascribed to men, demonstrating reasoning capacity and the power of the word.

Muslim females in the hostland: the *hijab* and self-care

It is undeniable that the physical traits of the people belonging to a culture and its rituals make it unique to the outside world. Throughout the following paragraphs, I will be specifically analysing the female’s use of the *hijab* in the collection, as well as cultural practices exclusive to them, which will also have an impact in the maintenance of their essence in the new environment.

The veil or *hijab* is a piece of cloth Muslim women use to cover their heads so that they remain unexposed in public (Brown 2006, 429). The veil serves as one of the most evident examples of the existent dichotomy between the public and the private scenes, specially due to the varied meanings it has been given through time and the controversies that have arisen around the topic of female covering in relation to the concept of freedom. According to Nash, “[t]he division of over clothing, particularly the wearing of the *hijab* and *niqab*, has taken on an increasingly polarized, confrontational aspect” (2012, 3-4). The use of the veil in the foreign country creates a cultural clash or division product of a lack of understanding per part of the foreign community. With time, and more particularly after the terrorist attacks of September 2001 in the USA, “Islamophobia” has occupied a great position, so it is logical to say that the use of the *hijab* drastically began to acquire more racist connotations (Chambers 2011, 15). From a public perspective, the veil can sometimes work as a mask that does not facilitate the task of getting to know well the person behind it, as “[s]omething is hidden” (Chambers 2011, 107). Privately speaking, on the other hand, the implicit message is different, which has been retranslated in terms of freedom for the female gender:

[T]he veil and the commitments it embodies, not to mention other kinds of Islamic practices, have come to be understood through the prism of women's freedom and un-freedom [...]. The force this coupling of the veil and women's (un)freedom commands is equally manifest in those

arguments that endorse or defend the veil on the grounds that it is a product of women's 'free choice' and evidence of their 'liberation' from the hegemony of Western cultural codes (Mahmood 2005, 195).

Contrary to the Western conception of the *hijab* as repressive, and in agreement with the private sphere, Aboulela sees in it a means for her liberation. At university in Sudan, she was mainly surrounded by open-minded people who would not have understood her decision of wearing it: "I used to look with a kind of admiration to the girls in university who wore the *hijab*, but it was only when I came to Britain that I felt free [...], so it was a very good time to being covering my head, without it having any repercussions" (Chambers 2011, 106). It is curious how she felt withdrawn towards wearing the *hijab* in a context in which it is taken as 'normal', while the freedom of choice Britain offered her, allowed her to establish preferences. This independence and empowerment she clearly reflects in stories such as "Souvenirs", in this case through the figure of a secondary character. Zahra's mother, a Bulgarian that lives now in Sudan and has converted into Islam, is on a pilgrimage to The Mecca (*Hajj*). She decides to follow traditions like *Ramadan*, but denies having to wear the veil and cover herself when she is back to Sudan, because of the high temperatures (Aboulela 2018, 70). Her determination makes her free to choose what aspects of Islam she is willing to accept and which ones she wants to ignore for her own comfort. These decisions do not make her less religious but, on the contrary, they provide her with the key for greater confidence and bravery to continue her journey as a convert.

To the reader, the *hijab* becomes a very evident female "identity marker", that "is merely the public uniform of a variety of types: feminine looking, attractive, glamorous, motherly" (Nash 2012, 48). By wearing it, women from different origins, but similar traditions, unite for the purpose of "living in Britain" (Nash 2012, 48), establishing a sisterhood that gives them the strength to continue struggling for a better future. As valid as it is not using the *hijab*, some women in Aboulela's work do find in the veil some kind of protection from the outside. In "The Ostrich", Samra travels to Khartoum for a visit, where she realises how much she misses the old times there: she longs for the idea of freely practicing her religion and wearing the *hijab* without suffering the fear of being racially displaced. Contrary to Aboulela herself, London does not give Samra the comfort she finds in the homeland, where there is a "breathtaking gratitude for simple things" (Aboulela 2018, 98). Parallel to Sudan, "[m]any 'modern Egyptian women' have returned to wearing the veil," as it "makes it easy for women to avoid sexual harassment on public

transportation” (Mahmood 2005, 16). Whatever their final decision is with respect to wearing the veil in the hostland, what may seem an oppressive piece of clothing for the Western public, it is at a private level a tool through which women can find safety and proclaim their identity as Muslim.

In the Muslim context, a traditional majority understands the act of covering the hair as having “the virtue of modesty”. However, there is not universal agreement on “how this virtue should be lived, and particularly about whether its realization requires the donning of the veil” (Mahmood 2005, 23). Contemporary feminist writers such as Aboulela disregard this restricted take of the veil as “yet another example of the subjection of women's bodies to masculinist or patriarchal valuations, images, and representational logic,” under which their bodies are “denied, submerged, or repressed” (Mahmood 2005, 158), turning the positive connotation of the idea of modesty into something demeaning. Despite this conception of modesty as repressive, and as Mahmood expresses in her work, the power to counteract this theory of representation is in women’s hands, so that “the outward behaviour of the body constitutes both the potentiality and the means through which interiority is realized” (2005, 159). On this basis, and according to the Muslim and Arab ideas of correct behaviour, it appears to exist a close relationship between the concepts of ‘modesty’ and ‘propriety’, a concept that stands for doing what is moral and appropriate in a specific context. Judging by how Lateefa expresses herself in “Summer Maze”, she can be described as very rooted in Muslim traditions, and shows a strong sense of propriety especially when referring to intimate relationships and marriage: “When people wed in the West [...], they would have tried each other out first” (Aboulela 2018, 17). In this conversation she has with her sister, she finds it outrageous the idea of having a very close physical contact with a person you are not married with. Even though years have passed since she moved to London, Lateefa is still a very conventional and deeply religious woman, while her sister, who remained in Cairo, has evolved with time. Although Cairo has not developed in parallel to the West, it has not remained stuck in the past Lateefa remembers: “[t]hings here are not as conventional and innocent as in our youth” (Aboulela 2018, 18) – Salwa says noticing her anxiety. It is not that her sister is more tolerant than Lateefa, despite living in Egypt, but for Lateefa, “home becomes primarily a mental construct built from the incomplete odds and ends of memory that survive from the past. It exists as a fractured, discontinuous relationship with the present” (McLeod 2000, 211). Lateefa becomes then part of “a coalition of individuals motivated by an emotional need to belong to a national homeland

which is changing without them” (Wilcock 2018, 376-377), so that she resorts to those frozen memories so as to fill in those gaps and find that connection. Emotionally motivated, women’s reaction to the new situations in *Elsewhere, Home* have to do mostly with their relative’s presence in the stories and their memories back in the homeland, but also, and more importantly, they are a consequence of the impediments they encounter in the hostland, since the gap between their culture and the new one could be overwhelming.

When cultural practices see themselves restricted in time and space, it is just a matter of time that these are deleted and shadowed by the one that prevails in that context. In terms of beauty habits, women in Muslim cultures put into practice a variety of rituals that make them feel feminine and good with themselves, but that also enhance their attractiveness and make them feel their culture alive. One of the most common ones has to do with the way they smell, for which the use of essences for their own body care becomes a daily routine. In the case of “Muslim Arab Sudanese women”, “[a] clean, smooth, and perfumed body is a social, cultural, and aesthetic requirement” (Fábos 2012, 228). Together with their smell, their appearance is also very important and trying to ‘whiten’ their skin is a practice they have carried out since ancient times for them to maintain their “centrality within the Sudanese context” (Fábos 2012, 228). Muslim Sudanese people living in Britain actually try to deviate from conjectures that link them to the “‘black’ community.” Their “self-ascribed identities include women’s habitation of an Arab – as opposed to an African – body” (Fábos 2012, 224). For the purpose, the use of henna tattoos is a very common practice, as its dark brown colour makes their skin look lighter. In “Something Old, Something New”, the protagonist’s wife, from Sudanese origins, covers her palms with “henna pattern[s]” after marrying in Khartoum (Aboulela 2018, 48). However, she is worried about the time they go back to Edinburgh, in case the patterns are not “light enough” to go unnoticed (Aboulela 2018, 48). She is clearly concerned about the possible racism she may encounter in the hostland but, to her surprise, he does not mind what people think and he can just appreciate “how soft she [is]”, feeling an extraordinary attraction towards her smell (Aboulela 2018, 49). The Sudanese fiancée here confirms the importance of the distinctive cultural self-care routines mentioned above, proving that these get to enhance their feminine charms and identity, an especially difficult task in the West due to the strong presence of stereotypes that negatively pigeonhole Muslim and Arab migrants.

Attitude and relationships in connection to faith and fate

“Culture in itself is not static, it is very fluid. Culture evolves, adapts and adopts” (Voicu 2013, 172). Voicu’s affirmation involves a whole process of both movement and change. From the ‘shy’ access of a different culture into a new environment and its evolution, to the final establishment of the same. The female characters in *Elsewhere, Home* maintain their essence in their attempt to subsist, but also strive to evolve and adapt to the circumstances, regardless of what the impediments are. “Aboulela ha[s] constructed [her] fiction around conflicting cross-cultural encounters”. Her writing fits “within the feminised space which may be said to operate between the continuing pressures of Western cultural imperialism, and conservative, anti-modernist cultural Islamism” (Nash 2002, 28). These women reaffirm the idea of diasporic identities as people managing to release these imperialist constraint so as to fit in the new environment, for which a positive attitude becomes key for them to prosper and become part of a community, and that will normally require a change in perspectives. A good example of this positive progression is embodied by our protagonist in “Pages of fruit”, where she changes her opinion towards the female writer she is a fan of. While some time ago she would feel a special attachment to her, fifteen years later she considers herself “a different woman, older and more confident” (Aboulela 2018, 209). “When I spoke of my admiration for your early novels, I did so without belittling myself” (Aboulela 2018, 209) – she says, reflecting an improved self-worth in her words. A convergence of circumstances in the hostland have made of her a more mature female, providing her with the strength and confidence she needed to thrive: from the fact that her idol disappointed her with an arrogant attitude in a book signing, to the fact that she moved to Aberdeen, got her first job and managed to bring up a family there. We can also appreciate this amenability to change in Shadia in “The Museum”. In her interaction with Bryan, a British guy, she feels impressed and inferior with respect to his Western appearance, as “[h]e was tall and she was not used to speaking with people with blue eyes” (Aboulela 2018, 167). Because of their marked patriarchal background, Muslim women tend to show themselves inferior in front of men, but here Shadia does not shrink and continues telling him she does not like his earring and long hair (Aboulela 2018, 167), for what she proves herself defiant, while he seems ashamed by her honesty. The way both characters confront the situation debunks the socially constructed stereotypes about male and female, in this case Christian and Muslim respectively. Their differences in gender, religion and appearance do not stop her

from breaking boundaries with him and showing herself capable of interaction. Both stories show Muslim females capable of breaking with clichés and adapting to inconveniences that get to enhance the power of their mind over social pressure and an imposing context.

Mahmood defines the concept of ‘agency’ as “the capacity to realise one’s own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles” (2005,8). Muslim women generally “come to measure themselves against the ideals furbished by [the] traditions” of their culture (Mahmood 2005, 32). Therefore, the agency they consider they have is many times “a product of the historically contingent discursive traditions in which they are located,” and not of themselves as individual women (Mahmood 2005, 32). In the West, a Muslim woman in possession of full-agency also acquires this free will, which Aboulela considers a delicate issue: “especially for young people in the West, freedom of choice just becomes a kind of confusion. They have a lot of choices, but it doesn’t necessary mean that they are making the right choices. Freedom then can be a negative thing, rather than a galvanizing force” (Chambers 2012, 114), to the point the possibilities of choosing the right path could be rather low. The restriction of freedom in the Islamic world reduces the chances to fail to this right path or *sharia*, understood as those “moral discourses” and quotidian practices that conform to the “Islamic law” (Mahmood 2005, 46). Loyal to her principles, Aboulela places characters in the West that carefully conform to this law, but that also defy its contingencies so as to fit in the new society, confirming this way full-agency over their lives.

Throughout the rest of this section, their agency and progressive ‘attitude’ mentioned before will be considered in relation with the rest of the characters. On the one hand, we will analyse the links with the figure of the husband and in connection with the family unit, through which we will meet three different women types that are present in *Elsewhere, Home*. After that, we will look into the relationship mother-daughter, decisive for the evolution of the female protagonists in the hostland.

The origins of Leila Aboulela remain in romance literature, which would explain her admiration for authors such as Charlotte Brönte, who had a great influence on her writing (Chambers 2011, 111). Aboulela calls for the romantic idea of the dependent woman, who is “to some extent helpless” (Chambers 2011, 112). Despite providing the reader with instances of thriving women, she still feels a more special connection with the classic feminist image of the woman, rather than her extremely independent and more contemporary version. It is what she calls the “prefeminist woman character” (Chambers

2011, 112), somehow conditioned by men, but already showing herself powerful and able to survive by herself. In relation to the figure of the husband, the wives Aboulela portrays conform to this idea of woman, faithfully committed to their marital life even when the conditions are not ideal. The family in “Coloured lights” is separated for economic reasons, but feels united by the dream of moving together very soon where the husband is: she is “in search of the work [she] cannot find at home” (Aboulela 2018, 149), while he is working in Kuwait, near Arabic Emirates. Aboulela reflects on how diaspora has become a source of suffering, but also the only resource for many families to subsist and provide the coming generations with a better future.

Other females in the work are married, but do not have the support of their husbands, as it is the case of Ruqiyyah, our female Islam convert in “Majed”. Despite feeling detached from her roots, plus having to deal with an unconsidered alcoholic husband, we meet a woman whose actions are brave and persistent for the wellbeing of her family. In contrast to the previous story, Ruqiyyah is alone in her struggle and it is her drastic change of life that eventually gives her the strength she needs to cope with her problems: “[s]he had not always been Ruqiyyah, she once was someone else with an ordinary name [...]. Ruqiyyah was so good, so strong, because she was a convert. But he, he had been a Muslim all his life and was, it had to be said, relaxed about the whole thing” (Aboulela 2018, 106-107). Her husband is portrayed as passive, since he is immersed in an environment that is familiar to him, while the tensions of a home that is not her original one contributes to her attentiveness and resistance. In terms of religion, Aboulela writes back to the Western perspective of Islam in a way that she presents it “as a faith” (wahab 2014, 226) that the females in the collection “activate” (Nash 2012, 48) to face their fears. As a convert, Ruqiyyah proves that no boundaries apply for the practice of her faith and shows true devotion for Allah: “[s]he wore hijab when she went out, she got up at dawn and prayed” (Aboulela 2018, 113), she took her religion much more seriously than her husband and her desires to learn were never ending. In “The Ostrich”, Samra “pray[s] alone” in London without her husband, because he thinks the city “chips away at your faith bit by bit” (Aboulela 2018, 96). Contrary to their husbands, Samra and Ruqiyyah do not abandon religion when the situation is not ideal, which proves again their active role in the collection, versus men’s passivity.

Bringing up one’s children ‘away from home’ is a fear many parents have to deal with when migrating. This concern is even more salient in this third and last case, the one of the single woman who see herself alone in the whole process of educating the children.

The lack of a male counterpart makes of it an even more difficult task, especially for patriarchal cultures in which the figure of the man is the one thought to provide authority, but also protection and security to the family. Women like Lateefa in “Summer Maze” are representative of this courageous woman: she feels like “[f]lailing around in a maze” (Aboulela 2018, 19), but she manages to rise from the depths of an alien hostland and successfully educates her child alone. The title serves as a metaphor of the weaknesses and fears she confronts and eventually overcomes, all without a supportive male companion to help her along the way.

Economic independence becomes another boundary for Muslim women, since it is known that in their culture it is the man that normally works and brings the money home. The female protagonist in “Pages of fruit” is happy in her role as a mother and wife, but finds special relief when she gets a job, delightedly seeing her “life changed when [she] started to earn [her] own money” (Aboulela 2018, 206). The protagonist in “Circle Line”, from Abu Dhabi, uses her knowledge to give Arabic tuitions (Aboulela 2018, 185). Both women show willingness to earn a salary using their own resources, with no need of the wage of a male companion to fully cover their needs. The feelings of success and progress give them the strength to continue working on their self-realisation and personal satisfaction.

Instances of positive attitude, determinacy and strong personality are also evident in the relationship between mothers and daughters. In “Souvenirs”, Yassir’s sister Manaal plays an important role in the acceptance of her British sister-in-law into the family, often softening the disparities between Yassir and her mum with reference to his unexpected and non-traditional wedding (Aboulela 2018, 63). Nevertheless, “generational differences” are also evident in a diasporic situation, which paradoxically reinforce the bonds between them. Parents and their descendants may not share the same opinions for having grown up in different contexts, for which their relationship can be sometimes “complex and overlapping” (McLeod 2000, 213). Because of their conflicting views, Lateefa (“Summer Maze”) is aware that her daughter Nadia would not agree marrying a cousin. As time passes by, Lateefa gets more nervous because Nadia is still single and she wants her to marry soon “[b]ecause there is protection in marriage” (Aboulela 2018, 18). In Muslim societies, characterised for having a patriarchal structure, a single woman is thought to be unsafe and marriage would provide her with the husband’s protection and confidence. The scholar Saba Mahmood highlights the problematic arisen by Egyptian women who do not marry on the time established by their culture, as one of her informants

state that “a woman who is not married is rejected by the entire society as if she has some disease, as if she is a thief” (2005, 169). Marriage is seen then as a primary objective in women’s life, as falling into the “defective” label of being single at certain age may even ruin their relationship with their families or friends (Mahmood 2005, 179). Another example would be that of the mother in “The Circle Line”, who is concerned about her thirty-three-year-old single daughter because “in a few years’ time, the situation will no longer be a joke” (Aboulela 2018, 185). The mother is worried about her living abroad and that is why she unsuccessfully tries to organise an arranged marriage for her daughter. In contrast, the daughter prefers the freedom she enjoys in London, where women “are allowed a more organic start” than in the homeland (Aboulela 2018, 184), free from her family’s judgement. Despite the differences explained above, Aboulela’s females usually finish the stories with a notably improved relationship, which facilitates their persistence in the hostland. Lateefa feels happy at the end of “Summer Maze”, “because maybe, after all, there is hope” (Aboulela 2018, 20). Her relationship with Nadia only gets better after their visit to Egypt, a fact that reflects on the need of the mothers in the stories to make sure that, despite the distance, their descendants do not lose the interest on the land and still feel that connection to it. In “The Museum”, Shadia shows to be empathic with her mum and does not want to disappoint her going back to Khartoum “empty-handed, without a degree [...]”. Her mother deserved happiness after the misfortunes of her life” (Aboulela 2018, 162). By referring to Shadia’s mother, Aboulela portrays one more time the figure of the strong and vital woman who struggles for the well-being of the family, having “[s]ix girls to bring up, educate and marry off” (Aboulela 2018, 162-163), and all without the support of a husband.

As previously stated, religion becomes a frequent escape route for some females in *Elsewhere, Home*. Failing to their daily practices of faith can be even a burden that Shadia (“The Museum”) describes as a “[g]uilt”, “cold like the fog” in Scotland (Aboulela 2018, 162). Keeping their faith active is relieving in the hostland, serving as an anchor they can always resort to in moments of weakness. Similarly, fate also plays a very determinant role, without forcing them to exclude their religious believes. In some occasions, faith and fate in combination serve as an explanation for the events they encounter. Referring to Aboulela’s work *Lyrics Alley*, Wahab argues that “[f]ate is retranslated in terms of the psychological strength of endurance and the implicit value of pain rather than with regard to passive submission or reckless persistence” (Wahab 2014, 227). The characters’ mindset will be crucial to cope with a fate that is already

determined. Muslim women such as Shadia (“The Museum”) try to build up a future, but it is their ultimate strength of mind that allows them to persist in their struggle in the hostland. Shadia has been detached from her family and her fiancé to study in Aberdeen, where she shows patience waiting for the best to happen: “[t]his way [...] you will have your in-laws’ respect” (Aboulela 2018, 164) – says her mum. Saba Mahmood actually considers the notions of strength and patience “in the face of difficulty”. By disapproving God’s work, “you are denying that it is only God who has the wisdom to know why we live in the conditions we do” (2005, 170). The author establishes a relationship between God’s will and fate, which would explain why characters such as Shadia leave their lives in God’s hands, accepting it as their final destiny.

Conclusion

Labelled for so many centuries as the ‘weak gender’, the strength Muslim females prove to have in the stories is fundamental for their orientation towards acceptance and final liberation. The contrast of habits, culture and religion, along with their exposition and interaction in society pose a challenge in their search for personal fulfilment. However, rather than tending to passivity, Aboulela calls for the profile of the non-conformist woman that actively defies this challenges and stereotypes regarding Muslim in the Western so as to find a place for them and their families.

Taking into consideration all the factors and the role of the Muslim women in *Elsewhere, Home*, we can conclude saying that personal fulfilment is achievable for them, as they find their ways to overcome the challenges raised by migration without having to neglect their own roots. From all the factors analysed, we realise about the importance of a long-lasting positive attitude, which clearly becomes the first step towards adaptation and acceptance. This courage and temperance make of them a role-model for their families to follow. A good familiar relationship is positioned over marriage, as the latter do not always prove to give them the security and a feeling of realisation they pursue. In terms of social ties, Leila Aboulela also resorts to “passages connecting individuals with community life, ritual and the moral, everyday demands of *sharia*” (Nash 2012, 48), for which a sense of community and emotional support becomes essential. As the embodiment of their culture, the free use of the *hijab* and other cultural practices also become essential to keep their identity and culture alive. In their attempts to subsist and face homesickness, religious faith has proven to give these women the hope they need

and an explanation to many of their doubts and insecurities, a devotion that becomes determinant for them to accept a fate that is already written.

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