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The Identity Crisis and Memory: A Discussion of Anti-Islamism, Xenophobia and Racism in Leila Aboulela's Short Story "The Ostrich"

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Abstract

Last two decades have witnessed dramatic increases in anti-Islamism, xenophobia, and racism in Asia, Europe, and the USA particularly in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York. This paper argues how Leila Aboulela represents this rising anti-Islamic, xenophobic, and racist attitudes and discourses in her short story *The Ostrich*. the paper is simply divided into two parts. The first part closely examines how anti-Islamic, anti-Muslim and racial discourses and attitudes create in the story a sense of identity crisis through Aboulela's representation of her chief character Samra who feels herself psychologically and physically crippled, abused and alienated in the UK. The second part of the paper discusses how Aboulela invents a strategy of memory, which keeps her character Samara psychologically alive, "intact" and "unchanged" in the face of humiliation, disgrace, ostracism, and exclusion. In the story, Samra often recalls her beautiful memories with the Ostrich, her classmate at the college, as well as her memories of how her country provided her with a sense of belonging, dignity, grace, security, and unity. The paper discusses, therefore, how memory heals Samra's injured psyche and keeps her alive and intact amid her identity crisis caused by the rising anti-Islamic, xenophobic, and racist attitudes and discourses in the UK.

Keywords: Anti-Islamism, identity, memory, racism, and xenophobia

Introduction

There have been increasing anti-Islamic and racial discourses and attitudes since the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York (Cainkar, 2009; Moren, 2012; Husain and Howard, 2017; Yglesias 2019; Silverstein 2019; More 2019 and Gonen, 2020). Simply, the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre have become an excuse for the USA in particular and the Christian world, in general, to fuel verbally as well as a physically "war on terror" or what Samuel Huntington, one of America's greatest political scientists, calls in his 1993 article "The Clash of Civilisations." In it, he states that the world, which used to be the place of "clash" or conflict between the capitalist block represented by mainly the USA and the communist block represented by the Soviet Union during the cold war period until its collapse latter in 1990, would become a place of "civilizational conflicts" in the post-cold war period in that culture and cultural identity will shape the future structure of global politics. For him, the "clash" would take place between two big civilisations – Islamic and Western ones - because

the Islamic culture and civilisation, he claims, are problematic and with bloody borders and significantly incompatible with the Western liberal ideals such as pluralism, individualism and democracy (Huntington, 1996). Huntington's ideas could be debated for their accuracy, yet what is important is that his ideas might have widened the gulf further between these two cultures and civilisations in which Islamic culture and civilisation are unfortunately demonised by the Western politicians, media, televisions, movies and far-right nationalists in that Muslim are always labelled as "terrorist," whereas "the white people are never terrorist" (Corbin, 2017, p. 456). As a result, Muslims, Muslim-like people and people of colour have constantly been subjected to discrimination, fear, incriminating attacks, killing and exclusion as witnessed in the discourses of Donald Trump against four Democratic Party congresswomen of colour in the USA, as well as in recent attacks in Austria, Germany and India (Nia, 2019; Kiyagan, 2019; Kartal, 2020; Connolly, 2020; Bal, 2020; Gonen, 2020 & Subrahmaniam, 2020).

As to this widespread anti-Islamic and anti-Muslim sentiment, for example, Hamid Dabashi (2020) in his recent article "The world in grips of an epidemic more dangerous than coronavirus" finds "war on terror," "the clash of civilisations" and "racist fear-mongering" more dangerous than "coronavirus (COVID-19) [that] was first detected in the Chinese city of Wuhan" and "public health officials inside and outside of China have been trying to prevent the outbreak from transforming into a full-fledged global pandemic (n. p). For Dabashi, why the "fear of the foreigner" is more dangerous than "coronavirus (COVID-19)" is that medical experts are striving to develop a vaccine in laboratories to completely eradicate it soon, whereas the virus of "racist fear-mongering" or the "fear of the foreigner" has flourished throughout the centuries and tends to erupt now and then as social and political "pandemic" as seen in recent headlines and verbal and physical attacks across the world Dabashi, therefore, is very much worried about "the globalisation of this irrational and racist 'fear'" because continuously increasing day by day it is reaching a dangerous level of polarisation (n. p). Besides, Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Nazir Nader Harb (2014) argue that the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre have brought about the "shift" of paradigm in the relationship between Muslims and the white-based "religion" and "identity" not only in the USA but also in Europe in that "Some American Muslims reported that 9/11 introduced an era of intensified suspicion about Islam and Muslims on the part of non-Muslim neighbours, colleagues, classmates, and friends" (p. 478). It is this "suspicion" that "perpetuate[s] the claims of the anti-Islamic industry in the United States and Europe" through political propaganda, social media, television, and academia (p. 479). However, this "suspicion," as Caroline Mala Corbin (2017) discusses, unfortunately, results in the creation of "two false narratives"; of which "the first is that 'terrorists are always (brown) Muslims.' The second is that 'white people are never terrorists…'" (p. 456) as witnessed in the attacks on two mosques in the New Zealand city of Christchurch where 51 people died and many more injured when Muslims gathered for the Friday prayer. The attack was conducted by the white man Brenton Harrison Tarrant, a 28-year-old man from Australia who was defined in media reports as a 'white supremacist' and a member of 'far-right movement.' What else could it be if not a double standard of politicians and mainstream media in the western world who preferred not to dub that white man a "terrorist" but the one with a psychological disorder? As for the "false narratives," whose influence may be seen in the activities carried out by Tarrant, Corbin continues to argue that "Different strands of critical race theory can help us understand these two narratives. One strand examines the role of unconscious cognitive biases in the production of stereotypes, such as the stereotype of the 'Muslim terrorist.' Another strand focuses on white privileges, such as the privilege of rarely being labelled a terrorist" (p. 456).

Theoretical and Historical Background

As for these "two false narratives," there is a close relationship between the power and the Western "white supremacy" in which the latter which is a racist belief uses its power and superiority through sciences, politics, social media, TV, movies, and academia; eventually, it creates

a space for itself to act freely without facing any obstacles in the international relations and subject the rest of the world to its whimsical exploitative stratagem. Within this racist belief, the "white supremacy," as Corbin and Huntington argue, stigmatises the people of other races, colour and religion as the "Others" or enemies to validate its identity and sustain its exploitive politics across the world. Having considered these arguments, therefore, these "two false narratives" are of vital importance for the "white supremacy" and its racist belief as excuses not only to label Islam as a religion of terror and Muslims or Muslim-looking people terrorists but also to demonise them as such.

This paper studies this "white privilege," "racist fear-mongering," "suspicion," hatred and hostility towards Islam, Muslims, and Muslim-like people of colour in Leila Aboulela's short story *The Ostrich* (2018). The paper is divided into two parts. The first part closely examines how anti-Islamic, anti-Muslim and racial discourses and attitudes in the story create a sense of identity crisis through Aboulela's representation of her chief character Samra who feels herself psychologically and physically crippled, abused and alienated in the UK. Samra is from the Sudanese city of Khartoum and accompanies her husband Majdy studying for the doctoral degree. She witnesses in London how the people with the Islamic faith, as well as the people with the black- or brown-skin colour, are insulted, discriminated against and subjected to a sense of "Otherness" in their interaction with the white people. What Samra observes disturbs her deeply and arouses in her an irresistible yearning for going back to her home country, Sudan, where she strongly believes she is dignified and respected with her faith and skin colour without being exposed to any kind of segregation and humiliation. The second part of the paper discusses how Aboulela invents a strategy of memory which keeps her character Samra psychologically alive, "intact" and "unchanged" in the face of humiliation, disgrace, ostracism and exclusion (Aboulela, 2018, p. 104). In the story, Samra often recalls her beautiful memories with her classmate whose proper is not given, but she prefers to call him as the Ostrich at the college, as well as her memories of how her country provided her with a sense of belonging, dignity, grace, security, and unity. The paper tries to create a perception that memory heals her injured psyche and keeps her alive amid her turbulent experience of an identity crisis.

No critical materials have appeared so far exploring the themes of "white privilege," "racist fear-mongering," "suspicion," hatred and hostility towards Muslims and the people of colour in *The Ostrich.* One of the reasons could be that the story was published just two years ago in 2018 in the collection of short stories titled *Elsewhere, Home*; rather too short a period to start drawing the serious critical attention. The story could be of importance in two ways. As she usually does in her novels and short stories in English, Aboulela first seems to foreground the Sudanese culture and civilisation for the attention of the Western readers and world readers in general. Secondly, she deals with certain significant themes in the story such as identity, religion, cultural and psychological alienation of Muslims living in the Western world so that the readers, in general, will get to know how Muslims, as well as Muslim-looking people and the people of colour, are exposed to belittling situations in the predominantly white societies.

Analysis: Anti-Islamism, Xenophobia and Racism in "The Ostrich"

As soon as the story of *The Ostrich* opens, Aboulela introduces the reader to a sense of identity crisis in which her fictional character Samra experiences a kind of disturbing predicament in her psyche which leads her to feel humiliation and "Otherness" just as she sets foot at the Heathrow airport in London. Her husband Majdy, who is doing his PhD in London, meets his wife at the airport and at once seems to give an unusual impression; as if he has an identity problem - a sense of inferiority complex or he has already been assimilated by the white British culture because he mocks his wife straightaway probably for her skin-colour, her typical Sudanese attire or for her attitudes/gestures which are different from that of a white person at the airport:

> "You look like something from the third world," he said, and I let myself feel hurt, glancing downwards so that he would not see the look in my eyes. I didn't answer his taunting smile like he expected me to, didn't say, 'and where do you come from? I let him put his arm around me by way of greeting and gave him the trolley with my suit-cases to push (Aboulela, 2018, p. 85).

As the quotation indicates, what Majdy says shocks and makes Samra very sad and think as if her husband came from a different country. Majdy's view may derive from the skin-colour of his wife or the clothes she wears or her behaviour at the airport, which, in his view, may not be compatible with the expectation of the civilized western world as compared to "the third world." The quotation is of importance for several reasons. First, "the third world," from the Western point of view, or what Edward W. Said argues in his *Orientalism* (1978), is visibly linked to a negative view in which "the western world" "imagines, emphasizes, exaggerates and distorts differences of Arab peoples and cultures as compared to that of Europe and the U.S. It often involves seeing Arab culture as exotic, backward, uncivilized, and at times dangerous" ("What is Orientalism?", n. d. n. p.). Said argues that Orientalism is "the acceptance in the West of "the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, 'mind,' destiny and so on" and thus "Orientalism provided a rationalization for European colonialism based on a self-serving history in which 'the West' constructed 'the East' as extremely different and inferior, and therefore in need of Western intervention or 'rescue'" (Qt. in "What is Orientalism?", n. d. n. p.). Besides, Necla Mora (2009) asserts that "Orientalism refers to the external, isolating, discriminatory and prejudice-filled opinions of the Western European white man on the Eastern people and cultures" (p. 419).

This observation is just apt for the text quoted above wherein "the third world" from the standpoint of "the West" is linked to "the East" for the same reason. Majdy, coming from "the East" (Sudan), seems not only to have been affected by the orientalist view of "'inferiority" and negativity created by "the West" but he also seems to have internalized it unconsciously. For him, "the West" represents a kind of "superiority" and advancement in every aspect so that he does not want to be humiliated by his wife's appearance and clothes or he may not be happy with his wife in the sense that she does not act or speak in a way a western woman does. Simply, he belittles her with his "taunting smile" due to her so-called despising look. In this way, he immediately categorises her and then attaches an identity to his wife in that she finds herself at once within the nets of another identity alien to her own.

But what Majdy tells and how he acts towards Samra severely agitates her to the extent of being "hurt" and think as if he was not from the same country. For her, therefore, the first crisis begins right at the airport where she immediately senses that she is different and alien to the British society due to the country from which she comes or due to her skin-colour and clothes incompatible with those of the white British society. Under this crippling psychic effect caused by her husband, she remains silent and secretly strives to find out possible reasons behind his attitudes and discourse:

> He must have seen me first, I thought, while I was scanning the faces of the people who are waiting at the terminal, he must have been watching me all the time. I suddenly felt ashamed, not only for myself but everyone else who arrived with me on the aeroplane. Our shabby luggage, our stammering in front of the immigration officer, our clothes that seemed natural a few hours back, now crumbled and out of place (Aboulela, 2018, p. 85).

This passage explains how Samra's husband acts. He seems unhappy about "shabby luggage" and "clothes" of the people coming from Khartoum so that he, as a western white man, labels

his wife and other people as "Other." The way Samra feels "hurt" shatters her sense of psychic unity and causes her to sense that she is in a place to which she does not belong so that a feeling of being a stranger occupies her whole existence, forcing her to call into question why this new place would not accept her "natural" being. As the story progresses a little bit, the reader learns that for Samra, as for the people of colour, coming from "the East", life is not natural and real as it is in her native land but it is a kind of pretentious and fake: "…I confess that at times I longed not to return that in Khartoum I felt everything was real and our life in London a hibernation" (p. 86). As Aboulela represents her in London, Samra psychologically finds herself at once homeless, alien, baseless and senseless because London does not welcome, embrace, and value her with what she owned in Khartoum: her unique natural identity. Simply, she psychologically feels that her identity is not real anymore but fake and nothing but imitation to satisfy her husband's inferiority complex, along with the expectation of the white British society.

It is this imitation or pretension that upsets Samra most because it cripples the basis of her "real" and "natural" identity and gives her a logic that she has two identities – the one in Khartoum and the one in London. It seems that any attempt to marry these two lives is very difficult. Moreover, imitation is also a sign of inferiority complex imposed on and experienced by non-Westerners whether they live in "the East" or in "the West." This derives from the perception that the Western way of life is made to be seen across the world as a modern standard which the people beyond the West strive to internalise psychologically to be accepted as "modern", even though they are aware of this pretension. At the London Heathrow airport, for example, Majdy instructs Samra to be beside him while walking in the street:

> He dislikes it if I walk a few steps behind him. "What would people think," he says, "that we are backward, barbaric." He sneers at the Arab women in the black abayas walking behind their men. "Oppressed, that's what people would think of them. Here they respect women, treat them as equal; we must be the same," he says. So I have to be careful not to fall behind him in step and must bear the weight of his arm around my shoulder, another gesture he had decided to imitate to prove that, though we are Arabs and Africans, we can be modern too (p. 86).

This quotation is not only interesting but also significant as to the relationship between "the East" and "the West," together with the identity politics of people in "the East" constructed by "the West" – it is interesting in the sense that while certain attitudes, manners, relationships and clothes like "abayas" are viewed as "backward, barbaric" in one part of the world (the West), they are considered "modern," civilised, positive and respectful in another part of the world (the East). Who gives these different meanings to these aspects of life in these two different parts of the world? Who judges that certain attitudes, manners, relationships, and clothes are "backward, barbaric" and "modern"? Why are these different meanings perceived as negative and positive in two different parts of the world? How do these different meanings affect the lives of the people in "the East" and "the West"? The answers to these questions are easy in the sense that "the West" is regarded as holding the power and thus creates meaning and impose it on the people who have no power in "the East." The relationship between them is binary in the Saussurean sense and thus based on the working of superiority and inferiority in that "inferiority" gains meaning through its difference from "superiority." That is, the "superior" produces knowledge and meaning, whereas the "inferior" remains silent, passive, and alienated due to lack of power, even though they do not fully accept it.

In the quotation above, the way women walk a few steps behind their husbands and the way women wear their clothes (abayas or other Islamic dresses) are markers of their identity or what makes them have meaning and unity in their identities in "the East" where the waking behind and wearing "abayas" are not "backward, barbaric" or markers of oppression for women and where, as long as they are happy, no one can call their walking position and dress as "backward, barbaric." But the hegemonic Western thought, which has occupied the minds of the people in

the rest of the world, has created a perception that the way of life the Western people lead and the clothes they wear are "modern," civilised, and respectful, while the rest is "backward, barbaric" and primitive. Simply, the West has created a so-called standard of "modern" and those who do not live up to it are not viewed as "advanced" and civilised but as "backward, barbaric" so that, unfortunately, most of the non-westerners have this duelling consciousness between being the Easterner (inferior) and the Westerner (superior) in which they strive to show up as being "modern" and civilised, even though their unconscious says otherwise.

In the story, both Majdy and Samra undergo an identity crisis one way or another. Majdy tries to act like a Western man to conform to and be accepted as a so-called "modern" man by the white British society, even though it is not thoroughly possible as he admits and confesses to Samra at the end of the story: "…I question everything and I am not sure of anything anymore' (p. 102). It is obvious that Majdy has a sense of "inferiority complex," and thus he tries to show himself as part of the indigenous white culture. Moreover, he also wants to live in England if he gets "a work permit"; he does not want to go back to Sudan since Sudan, for him, is a country where there are not enough job opportunities, where the unemployment rate is very high, where "morality" has collapsed, where "politicians are corrupt" who "buy arms to fuel a civil war instead of feeding the hungry," where "racism" hits a peak, and thereby Sudan appears to him "more racist than the British" due to the relationship between the Northerners and the Southerners in his country (pp. 88-9). To him, all these factors make his country be doomed to backwardness in every aspect.

As for the backwardness, Majdy further thinks that his country also lacks certain advantages and services which a British enjoys. After getting home, for example, he and his wife start chatting. For a while, Samra, still under the shock created by her husband, observes "strangers" out of their window in the street and seems so confused in her feeling and vision that she is unable to define what she sees outside:

> The window, how many hours did I spend looking out of this window? For two years I looked out at strangers, unable to make stories about them, unable to tell who was rich and who was poor, who mended pipes and who healed the ill. And sometimes, disturbingly, not even knowing who was a man and who was a woman (p. 92).

Samra seems to be perplexed in her vision and loses her ability to make meaning of what she sees outside probably due to the impact of humiliation and discrimination she has been exposed to since she arrived. But Majdy, unlike his wife, always strives to see the point from another angle: his criteria of definition are rather different in that what he seems to appreciate is outward observable developments and advancements in life that Britain has on display so that he finds Britain better than Sudan:

> Strangers I must respect, strangers who were better than me. This is what Majdy says. Every one of them is better than us. See the man who is collecting rubbish; he is not ravaged by malaria, anaemia, bilharzia; he can read the newspaper, write a letter; he has a television in his house and his children go to a school where they get taught from glossy books. And if they are clever, if they show a talent in music or science, they will be encouraged, and they might be important people one day. I look at the man who collects the rubbish and I am ashamed that he picks bags with our filth in them. When I passed you on the road, I avert my eyes (pp. 92-3).

The quotation suggests materialistic differences between the two countries – Britain and Sudan – in certain ways in which Britain seems advanced with many opportunities, services, sciences, and arts. In consideration of these aspects, Majdy is enthralled and thus belittles his native country under the feeling of the inferiority complex and tries to be on the side of Britain which he thinks not only values him as for his life and identity but also represents advanced civic manners and refined behaviour which his country lacks.

On the other hand, Samra's feeling and view are quite different from her husband's because she, rather than paying much attention to what Britain offers to her husband, is preoccupied with the issue of the unity of her identity bestowed upon her by her country – an identity relating to Sudanese culture, tradition and Islamic belief. Having been to Khartoum for her two-month holiday, Samra is back to London yet again. Even though she has been there e for two years, she feels herself completely "a stranger once again" (p. 89). As a Muslim woman, she seems to strive to stick to her identity at whatever cost and thus she prefers to keep silence in the face of her husband's attitudes as well as his views and discourses about Sudan and Britain. Although she is "envied" back home for living abroad because living abroad for Sudanese people provides one with more "comfortable" life than that in Sudan, Samra appears indifferent to this view but strongly longs for holding on to her true "root" and identity (pp. 87-8). As the story progresses, Samra's crisis of identity gradually unfolds:

> And now that I am back, the room rises to strangle me. The window beckons and it is already dark outside. I was wrong to return. All the laughter and confidence has been left behind. What am I doing here? A stranger suddenly appearing on the stage with no part to play, no lines to read. Majdy points out the graffiti for me, 'Black Bastards' on the wall of mosque party, 'Paki go home' on the newsagent's door. 'Do you know what it means, who wrote it?' I breed a new fear of not knowing, never knowing who these enemies are. How would I recognize them while they can so easily recognize me? (p. 93).

What this passage suggests is linked to the sharp increase in the hate speeches after the 9/11 attacks because "black" and "Pakis" are immediately labelled as the enemy, terrorist and the "other" in their relationship with the white people. The way such discourses take place shows how the "war on terror" initiated by the USA has influenced the countries, leading to the application of racist and discriminatory identity politics in the western countries like Britain. That is, the 9/11 attacks and "war on terror" has fuelled what Dabashi wrote above the already-existing "racist fear-mongering."

The passage further indicates how British society is a racist and Islamophobic one. It stigmatises non-Westerners, the people of skin-colour and Muslims as the other. Racists and Islamophobes display what they have inside their minds on the walls and on the newsagent's door to signpost their hatred and anger towards the "Black" and Pakistani people who are considered "enemy." That is, the racist white people simply tell the "Black" and the Pakistani people that this society does not belong to them but the whites and that the latter has no value there and are simply "stranger" with no roots in the local white culture. This point of view always keeps non-whites and non-Muslims away from the center of society and culture and eventually creates a sense of rootlessness or what may be termed an identity crisis in the psyche of the "Black" and the Pakistani people.

As the quotation above illustrates, Samra immediately experiences a sense of identity crisis soon after she is back in London. Her husband shows her "graffiti" everywhere, "Black Bastards' on the wall of the mosque party, Paki go home" on the newsagent's door," which unsettles her emotionally. Eventually, she feels stifled and crippled and seems to lose at once her sense of confidence and security which she enjoyed abundantly back home in Khartoum; she realises that she has "no part to play, no lines to read" in such a place which discriminates and strips the people like herself of their essence and identity. In a sense, Samra identifies herself with the "Black" and the Pakistani people who are considered "enemy", "bastards" and "Paki." These words imply negative and derogatory connotations in her mind, and with these words, the fanatic white racists and Islamophobes insult non-whites and Muslims. What makes non-westerners and Muslims an immediate target is their clothes, beards, and skin colours. Samra, therefore, with her Islamic dress and African skin colour, which shows that she is from "the third world," is afraid and nervously apprehensive of her vulnerability. This sense of "strangeness"

and non-belonging to the white British society unsettles her emotionally and puts her into a kind of inner psychic crisis.

This inner psychic crisis continues to deepen further as her husband keeps on treating her contemptuously. For example, Majdy has "new [white] friends" whom he often invites to his home and offers them food cooked by Samra. Since he suffers from a sense of inferiority in the company of his white friends and considers his wife no-"modern" from the third world, Majdy forces Samra to be careful when she speaks in the presence of his friends and asks her not to say anything which his friends consider no-"modern" (p. 93). When she does so by mistake, he slaps and insults her, even though she fails to understand the reason behind his attitudes (p. 94):

But I must be very wary, there are things I mustn't say when they are here. I mentioned polygamy ones saying we shouldn't condemn something that Allah had permitted, remarking that Majdy's father had a second wife. When they left, he slapped me, and fool that I was, I didn't understand what I had done wrong.

> "Why, why," I asked, and he slapped me more.
>
> "It's worse when you don't understand," he said. At least have a feeling that you have said something wrong. They can forgive you for your ugly colour, your thick lips and rough hair, but you must think modern thoughts, be like them on the inside if you can't be from the outside." And what stuck in my mind after the stinging ebbed away, after the apologetic caresses, what clung to me and burned me time and time were his comments about how I looked. I would stand in front of the mirror and, Allah forgives me, hate my face (pp. 93-4).

In this passage, Aboulela brings up an important issue relating to the identity problem in the Muslim world, as well as in the rest of the world, through her representation of characters' views and attitudes. What she writes is that many people in the non-Western world have been psychologically influenced by the "superiority" complex of the Western world internalised since the Enlightenment. The so-called superiority complex of the West is based on its success and advancement in technology, experimental and positive sciences, education, and fine arts which the rest of the world lacks. This aspect has become a so-called benchmark for a sense of western superiority which it has used to control and stigmatise the rest of the world as inferior since much of the non-western world is still struggling with these technological and scientific developments. Moreover, the West's technological, scientific, and artistic advancement has also been attributed to the sense of "modern" in life because these have undermined the basis of the traditional forms of society and life. In this respect, those who lack such advancements are regarded as no modern. The West has imposed this self-styled modern perception of life upon the rest of the world in which the non-western people have felt and psychologically internalised a sense of inferiority in their unconscious.

Likewise, Aboulela represents Majdy in a way that he strives to identify himself with the Western notion of "modern" to validate his identity. That is, he seems to have a feeling that if he does not act in the way a western man acts and if he does not accept the advanced and modern way of life, he will not be admitted by the people around him and so he does not want to display his inferiority complex in the presence of his friends. What is also interesting and shocking is that the skin-"colour, thick lips and rough hair" of Majdy's wife disturb him because what he implies is that these features do not count for "modern' looks " as these betray her identity as no-westerner. It is difficult to establish a relationship between "colour, thick lips and rough hair" and modernism. Besides, Majdy is also unhappy with the use of the word "polygamy" since the western people, he believes, do not practise "polygamy," allowed by the Holy Qur'an depending on certain conditions. For him, the reasons behind his sense of inferiority could be the view that the West is considered a secular and "modern" place where religious views, discourse and practices are no longer favoured because modernism itself disparages religion; also,

the feminist and liberal movements have encouraged gender equality in which there is no space for "polygamy." For Majdy, anyone who does not want to accept these western views cannot be "modern" in his/her thoughts because he thinks that this is a standard endorsed by the west to be an acceptable "modern" individual. In his view, therefore, Samra does not have modern thoughts, but he wants her to "be like them on the inside if you can't be from the outside." This discourse is also interesting in that it allows to read the mindset of Majdy which makes him think that though his wife cannot change her outward appearance and skin colour, she may at least think like a white western woman. It shows the mindset of a colonised man, to which Majdy seems no exception. The way Majdy thinks reminds us of What T. B. Macaulay said about the education of Indians under the British colonial rule in his *Minute on Education* (1835):

> …I feel with them [Indians] that it is impossible for us, with our limited means, to attempt to educate the body of the people. We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern, --a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population (Macaulay, 1835, n.p).

Macaulay's views about Indians are quite interesting and at the same time shocking in the sense that they bear out the politics behind the British imperialism. Once the thoughts of people are changed by the imperialist power, it is easy to control their minds and have them serve the aim of the imperialism. What is also equally important is that "English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and intellect" are shown to Indians clandestinely as "modern." Besides, as for what to be "modern" means, John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed (2007) argue:

> To be modern was not simply a matter of technology transfer. It was to be *westernised* – wear modern (that is, Western) dress; speak a modern (Western) language; go to a secular school or university with a modern (Western-based) curriculum; and build modern cities and neighbourhoods, often designed by western architects (p. 41).

Macaulay's views together with the observations of Esposito and Mogahed underscore that "the West" has paid attention not only to the inside of a non-Westerner but also to his/her outside appearances in which it has applied a total identity construction politics. Unfortunately, this identity politics of "the West" has been effectively imposed on the non-western world. Those who refused this model of identity have been marginalised, categorised and isolated. In this respect, "the West" has left the world between yes or no option.

The passage above from Aboulela's story is corroborative of Macaulay's views and Esposito and Mogahed's argument, in which she represents Majdy in a way that he appears to be in a dilemma about Samra. For instance, he wants her to "be like them [his white friends] on the inside if you can't be from the outside" but Samra seems unable to change herself even "on the inside," whereas changing from "the outside" remains just an impossibility because of her brown-skin colour, even after dropping her Islamic dress for a western one. In Aboulela's portrayal of him, Majdy's views represent a crisis of identity in which he tries to think and act like a British man, even though his skin-colour persistently betrays his adopted role. His psychic reality keeps him divided and thus he constantly fluctuates between who he is and who he wants to be. He is left with his acute inferiority complex further aggravated by his total inability to think and look like his white friends. He confesses to this fluctuation at the end of the story while sitting together with his wife:

> 'I was afraid you wouldn't come back,' Majdy suddenly said. And I wondered if this was the right time, so late at night, to talk of such things, things that would drive the sleep from our eyes…'I work better when you are next to me,' he was saying. 'It is

easier to keep awake. When I saw you at the airport today, you brought back many memories to me. Of people I love and left behind, of what I once was years ago. I envy you and you find that funny, don't you, but it is true…I question everything, and I am not sure of anything anymore' (p. 102).

The quotation suggests the loss of identity leaving Majdy perplexed and lost as to where to position himself. The return of Samra awakens him from this schizophrenic state of mind and reminds him of who he is, of what his root is and of where he belongs to.

However, Samra is aware that she is insulted and hurt by her husband due to her "look" and her "thoughts" which are not compatible with his view of a modern and advanced woman and up to the expectancy of the white British society. How her husband acts and what he tells her surprises and shocks her, leading her to experience a kind of crisis in her psyche so acute as to push her almost to self-hatred as she would "stand in front of the mirror and [say], Allah forgives me, hate my face" (p. 94). Nevertheless, Samra is much concerned with her root, belief, culture, and identity: she has no intention to give up what makes her who she is. For the preservation of her identity, Aboulela artistically devises a strategy of memory which keeps Samra alive and undamaged amid her husband's insulting and humiliating jibes, as well as of the racial segregation imposed on the people like her. Using memory, Aboulela enables Samra to establish and maintain imaginatively the contact with her past, her country, and her tradition, as well as with the Ostrich, her nameless classmate in Khartoum. She misses in London what she left behind back home and so recalls her happy days at her college, remembers the time when no one insulted her or posed any threat to her sense of security and unity when no one segregated her and no one considered her no-"modern" for her thoughts or her Islamic dress; ergo, her happy memory of the good old days sweeps away the crippling mood created by her husband's taunts and sneers.

For instance, Samra's husband continues to damage her sense of integrity, identity and her faith, without which she, as a Muslim woman, feels that she is nothing: "'Majdy says, if you cover your hair in London they'll think I am forcing you to do that. They won't believe it is what you want.' So, I must walk unclothed, imagining cotton on my hair, lifting my hand to adjust an imaginary tobe" (pp. 94-5). In this quotation, Aboulela touches upon a very significant issue faced in Muslim countries whereby she represents the secular-minded people and the people in power without a sentiment for Islamic faith as well as the smear propaganda against the Islamic dress/scarf of Muslim women in some Muslim countries. The secular-minded people, as witnessed in some Muslim countries, unfortunately, vilify the Islamic dress/scarf of Muslim women as a sign of backwardness which they think is not compatible with the modern dress code in secular modern systems as already seen in the quotation from Esposito and Mogahed. In some countries, Muslim or secular, the people in power also order and even force Muslim women to take off their Islamic dress/scarf at workplaces, as well as at school and universities, with an excuse that such a way of dressing gives rise to a sense of categorisation and labelling in the public space but it is not true as long as a Muslim woman claims that this kind of dress is for the sake of her faith. It is true for anyone who wears something for her/his religious belief so that s/he should be respected. Those who are against the Islamic dress spill out their hatred against Islam. Moreover, there are ongoing dirty campaigns against the Islamic dress/scarf of Muslim women across the world in many ways, which has gained speed in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. First, the feminists argue that the patriarchal Muslim men force their wives and daughters to cover their hair without their consent, which they think discriminates women and limit their movements and freedom and then curb their identity as female. Secondly, some in Muslim and non-Muslim countries argue that the Islamic dress/scarf is not religious but a political sign imposed on Muslim women by which they spoil the order and cause chaos in society, and for these campaigners, who support the two groups above, religion is a personal issue and should be confined to the private space as in Protestantism so that Muslim women go out without their

headscarf/Islamic outfit as it was in the time of Jahiliyyah. Although Muslim women continuously claim that their dress/scarf is the order of the Almighty Allah in the Holy Qur'an and thus an inseparable part of their faith and identity, they have never had their voices heard so far but always exposed not only to exclusion, humiliation and discrimination in public space mainly after the 9/11 attacks, but they have also been unable to take advantage of what the women without the "Islamic dress/scarf" have enjoyed in the public life.

Likewise, in the quotation above, Samra too faces a similar exclusion and discrimination which wreaks havoc on her faith and identity. By hiding behind the so-called excuse that the people think that "I am forcing you to do that," in fact, Majdy seems to show his dissatisfaction with Samra's scarf, as well as with the way of life, which he thinks is inferior and so he just covers up his own opinion resulting from his inferiority complex. As a Muslim woman, it is a torture for Samra to uncover her hair and to walk "unclothed" in the London streets to satisfy the demand of her husband and the expectation of the western people: "So I must walk unclothed, imagining cotton on my hair, lifting my hand to adjust an imaginary tobe." Without the Islamic dress/scarf, she imagines herself what she will be and what she will do; she feels herself psychologically naked as well as stripped of her faith and identity. As a Muslim woman, she identifies a close relationship between her Islamic identity and her dress/scarf in her life, and thus the guilt feeling she has, for the absence of her Islamic scarf, destroys her and shatters her confidence, sense of security and unity of her faith and uniqueness.

In the face of her wounded psyche and sense of insecurity, Aboulela's use of memory comes to Samra's rescue, keeping her identity intact. With the energy and power created by memory, Aboulela enables Samra immediately to plunge imaginatively into her memory, which psychologically relieves her of her agony when she imaginatively takes herself away from her physical connection with her environment in London. Samra recalls the time she spent at her school in Khartoum together with the Ostrich and her other friends; she remembers how the *muezzin* (one who calls Muslims to prayer from the mosque) called them to prayer, how they prayed together in spiritual bliss and how they felt harmony, unity and security in their lives. In Khartoum, unlike in London, however, she was not subjected to discrimination as a "third world" citizen but felt herself "part of the harmony that I needed no permission to belong. Here in London, the birds pray discreetly, and I pray alone. A printed booklet, not a muezzin, tells me time. Here in London, Majdy does not pray. 'This country,' he says, 'chips away at your faith bit by bit'" (pp, 95-6). As seen here, Samra's identity is very much fragmented between these two marginal positions or worldviews: that is, she always oscillates imaginatively between the life in Khartoum with its happiness, integrity and harmony and the life in London with its exclusion, isolation, insecurity and fragmentation.

What inwardly and spiritually keeps Samra alive is her memory and time she spent with the Ostrich. As in Virginia Woolf's short story *The Mark on the Wall*, the Ostrich becomes a focal point by which she strives to escape from the wearisome view of crippling exclusion, humiliation, and alienation when she mentally loses her physical connection wither husband and London. A happy memory of the past in Khartoum heals and saves her from the destruction of faith and personality while in London. Her memories unroll and unite her spiritually with the Ostrich as well as with her friends around him back in Khartoum:

> The ostrich sitting on the bumper of a car parked inside the university, a number of us around him, standing against its windows. Notebooks in our arms, those thin notebooks with a spiral wire holding the pages, a drawing of the university on the front cover. What was the weather like? Hot, very hot - we can smell each other's sweat. Or one of those bright winter days when the sun softens its blows and a breeze whispers around the trees. Dust on the car, inside it; dust clinging to the Ostrich's hair, dust climbing between our toes. The Shadows of the tree dance around the Ostrich, elusive patches of shade. What did we speak of in those days, when everything seemed possible and we were naïve,

> believing the University an end, not a means? 'Some emirs in the Gulf bought a horse in England for ten million pounds. Imagine ten 10 million in hard currency. It could have built a hospital, schools, [and] roads. Shoes for me,' says the Ostrich stretching his feet, his Sandals torn, his toes coarse and gnarled, feet that withstand burning tiles…'Wish for a coup, the first thing they'll do is close the university, or better still a reason for a strike a month or so before the exams. Postponement and no Fiscal Policy…What has that man been going on about all the year? Swear I saw last year's paper and couldn't even tell which parts of the lecture notes the answer came from.'
>
> Cinnamon tea, sweet in chipped glasses. Roasted watermelon seeds, the salt dissolving in our mouths, the empty shells falling around like leaves. The Ostrich, a forgotten shell on his lip, slides down from the car's bumper, raises his arms, head back and turns around in circles. Under his arms, there are patches of wetness. His weak eyes brave the midday Sun. Laughter bubbles inside him letting lose the shell from his lip. 'The fan,' he says, laughing more, bending forward, and slapping his hands together. 'The fan in the common room fell from the ceiling. You should have seen it. It went whizzing around the room like a spinning top.' We exclaim, we ask questions, no one was hurt, hardly anyone was in the room at the time. He found it funny. Perhaps this is the essence of my country, what I missed most. Those everyday Miracles, the poise between normality and chaos. The awe and breath-taking gratitude for simple things. A place where people say, 'Allah alone is eternal' (pp. 97-8).

This long quotation is of importance and illuminating for us to see for Samra the differences between life in Khartoum and the life of London through her memories. By using her memories, Aboulela, as we have it in Romantic and modernist literature, employs a kind of "double-consciousness" or "duelling consciousness" which allows Samra in the story to travel backwards and forward in time – Samra in the past and Samra in the present. Why Samra takes recourse to the labyrinth of her memory is, in fact, also a technique to lay bare Aboulela's dissatisfaction with the white British society's racist and Islamophobic attitudes towards Muslims, Muslim-looking people and the people of colour. As implied in the story, such people are not treated as equal humans but excluded and othered in their active perception. The white British society humiliates them and eventually overtly and covertly tries not only to strip them of their identity and faith but also force them to assimilate and conform to its crippling forces. Against this backdrop, Aboulela devises a strategy to rescue Samra from alienation, exclusion, strangeness, assimilation and annihilation of the racist British society and culture, a strategy of "double consciousness," a term coined by the Romantic English poet William Wordsworth, whereby Aboulela employs memory as a device which enables Samra imaginatively to establish a sensual contact with her happy moments of the past and resurrects them to lit up her unhappy present moment. When she loses her contact with her husband, her environment and crippling atmosphere of exclusion and humiliation, she aspires to a moment of happiness, self-value, harmony, unity, and security via her recollection of the past.

In another moment of vision, her memory with the Ostrich continues once again to heal Samra's wounded psyche when she recalls her happy moments with him. She recalls how she met him in the library and he told her: "'Yes, I have remembered you with longing, at al-Zahra, when the horizon was bright and the face of the earth gave you pleasure, and the breeze was soft in the late afternoon as if it pitied me.' I smiled at him then, wondering if he could see my smile, knowing he was memorizing the poem" (p. 99). As the quotation suggests, Samra remembers spending good time with the Ostrich at the college when she was in Khartoum; she recalls rejoicing her time under the soft "breeze" without being exposed to any kind of polarisation, even though her country is a poor one. She suggests that the place where you are happy and

secure is your home and so she feels herself a "stranger" in London without any sense of belonging to it whatsoever. London suppresses, disregards, and excludes the people like her as a human being for their colour, faith, and appearances.

Eventually, her memory becomes a kind of medicine for Samra to preserve her integrity and unity against humiliation and insecurity. For her, as for Aboulela, the memory becomes a kind of resistance device or a kind of weapon in the face of the threat of annihilation. Whenever she falls into a sort of depression and crisis, "the sudden rush of recognition, the warmth, the shy laughter" of the past that haunts her vision avails her of the opportunity to achieve "happiness…in a few minutes, a few unexpected minutes in the aisle of an airplane" in the width of confusion and despair (p. 103). At the end of the story, therefore, Majdy confesses to the fact that Samra, unlike him, manages to preserve her integrity and identity and remains "intact, unchanged" despite various unsettling pressures imposed upon her:

> I wondered if this was the right time, so late at night, to talk of such things, things that would drive the sleep from our eyes…'It is easier to keep awake. When I saw you [at] the airport today, you brought back many memories to me. Of people I love and left behind, of what I once was years ago. I envy you and you find that funny, don't you, but it is true. I envy you because you are displaced yet intact, unchanged, while I question everything, and I am not sure of anything anymore' (p. 102).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper argues how the "war on terror" started by the 9/11 attacks has fuelled further the already existing racist and Islamophobic behaviours and discourses in the western world. This situation has encouraged many western countries to openly voice their hatred and anger towards Muslims, Muslim-looking people, and the people of colour. In her story *The Ostrich*, Aboulela represents this disquieting condition through the portrayal of her characters and their views in the racist British society. She deals with the difficulties that non-westerners face and suffer in British society and culture. As implied in the story, they are excluded and segregated due to their faith, dress and skin-colour by the white supremacy, which sets up a standard of life regarded as "modern" and then imposes it upon the rest of the world. Nonetheless, Aboulela articulately invents an artistic strategy whereby she employs memory to keep her fictional character Samra spiritually "intact, unchanged" even though she is often forced to act in the way the west and her husband want her to do against her will. Thus, the memory becomes a silent weapon of resistance and reaction for her against the pressures to which she has been exposed physically and psychologically.

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