

Negotiating Narrative in Transcultural Spaces by Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*

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Abstract: *Many Anglophone novelists attempt to conceptualize diverse experiences from their own transcultural spaces. They reflect how transcultural identities are burdened with cultural ambivalences and founded through a process of belonging, dislocation, alienation, and assimilation. This paper sets out to negotiate representation of narration in cultural spaces in Leila Aboulela's Minaret (2005). She recreates the images of 'home' and 'homeland' through a process of cultural narration, she uses space metaphorically and aesthetically to negotiate transculturality. Transcultural space is movable and dynamic; it is generated by recognition and adaptation of others, causing a constant process of transformation and change, opening up a space for bridging and narrowing the differences, hyphen spaces, hybrid experiences, multiple identities and constructing a new mixed transcultural space of identification and attachment. Aboulela believes that in this way she does not exclude or alter her old values, memories and yet valorize the new. In this light, she tries to transform cultural, emotional, spiritual, and national differences into deference, assimilation and adaptation. Her journey is to move beyond one's immediate consciousnesses, circumstances and identities. Consequently, Aboulela strives to achieve mutual assimilation and nullifies differences and divisions for constructing oneness and a harmonious cultural space.*

Keywords: assimilation, difference, identity, narrative, transcultural space

Narrative is present in almost human representation. It is a human practice; it is found in all literary genres. It is the principal dimension for constructing the conscious knowledge and the dynamic conceptions of historical, social and cultural experiences. This conception allows us to explore the inherent meanings and embodied experiences that latent to perceive the real and imaginative meaning of life. Roland Barthes states: "Narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself" (1966: 3). In this context, the universality of narrative exceeds the borders of infinite knowledge; it moves across the boundaries of epistemology, religion, culture, myth, history, and focuses on the sensual practices and techniques of storytelling. Here, the representation of cultural spaces in narrative discourse is produced in the intersection and overlapping of different spheres of assimilation, dislocation, alienation, nation, adaptation, location, and cultural identity. In so doing, narrative culture endeavors to achieve total transformation between individual and culture, and negates ambivalences between cultures and social identities. Moreover, it abandons the unresolved contradiction, conflict and struggle within Self and Other. In this sense, narrative representation has explicated identity matrixes,

questions of belonging, transcultural spaces, hybridity, old reminiscences, construction of new desires and knowledge by shattering the walls of change. Thus, narrative culture has forced the diasporic writer to face on one hand nativity and originality, on the other hand, adapted identity. Consequently, the migrant writer raises issues of identity crisis, cultural dislocation, uprootedness and cultural displacement. In this way, the tension of the hyphen-culture for diasporic writer is expressed in terms of geographical, social, historical, communal, cultural, racial, and individualistic contexts and values, since any conflict to assimilate totally within a different culture involves contradictions and paradoxes of the mother culture. Homi Bhabha opines: "these other cultures are fine, but we must be able to locate them within our grid. This is what I mean by a creation of cultural diversity and a containment of cultural differences" (1990: 208).

'Culture' comes from the Latin *colere* meaning to inhabit and to cultivate and usually refers to common patterns of human activity in a social order and the symbolic structures that make such activity significant. It was first used in the eighteenth century as a term suggesting the refinement and cultivation of the mind (Young 1995: 31). Similarly, as found in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, the concept of 'space' is a 'pure intuition', a property of the mind and the subjective condition of sensibility (1787: 158-159). The Kantian space transcending the earlier Euclidean space became closely associated with time thus balancing the 'external sense' with 'inner sense' building up a frame of transcendental aesthetics where the two became sources of cognition. Since the late eighteenth century the two ideas of 'culture' and 'space' became closely associated with the concept of cultural space which referred to familiar experience, a reservoir of beliefs, customs and practices. Edward Tylor in his book *Primitive Culture* included under its rubric "knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (1871: 1), later T.S. Eliot in his "Notes towards the Definition of Culture" (1948) saw culture as an incarnation of the religion of people in a larger social background. In the twentieth century Robert Young in his *Colonial Desire* saw it as a complex of often "contradictory differences through which the European Society defined itself" (1995: 54).

With the expansion of the Colonial enterprise, culture became a "site of political conflict" (Terry Eagleton 2000: 19) because of the unequal power relations. This was the phase when "culture" was not only redefined but also reshaped and modified. As coloniality gave away and postcoloniality, postmodernism and subsequently globalization, set-in cultural spaces grew more hybrid and hence arose the need for re-acculturation, assimilation, negotiation, and adaptation. In this, the present scenario literature became an important means not only representing but also of conditioning the socio-economic and historical determinants of culture. It gave the 'subalterns' a chance to 'speak' as Bakhtin opines that the novel/narrative is the only developing genre that "reflects more deeply, more essentially, more sensitively and rapidly, reality itself in the process of unfolding"(1981:7). In its endeavor to voice the past and re-create an awareness of it, this research paper represents that process of how new spaces are explored

and created and how these can be negotiated. Thus, taking into considerations the questions of "roots" and "routes", and once again of dislocation and negotiation.

In Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005) these concepts become essential imaginaries of exploration as the writer makes her protagonists negotiate the dissonance between the memory of an old culture and the concreteness of the newer ones. Aboulela becomes a cultural traveller, a cultural excavator, a cultural explorer, opening up inhabiting multiple spaces *en route* to self-discovery and transformation. This cultural traveller tries to excavate secret places and to experience latent potentialities within the external space of culture. Thus, the choice of diasporic writer who aims at telling stories from her own histories in an attempt to return to a space she has not forgotten. She feels that her 'land'/homeland has a great storytelling culture, and she wanders in diverse cultural spaces yet closely connected with her own place of origin. She attempts to establish shifting voices and new transformations concerning openness and flexibility.

Leila Aboulela is an Arab novelist, a true diasporic, voicing the dialectics of being distanced from home and exhibiting solidarity to newer cultural spaces. Displacement creates a physical estrangement and thereby compels the diasporic to enter the inevitable process of negotiation. She tackles the culture, the history and geography of a brave new world in a new way. In *Minaret* she takes up the themes of dislocation, border crossings, cultural frontiers and negotiation. She finds that what is 'perfect' in these times is to live in a hyphenated space between two or multiple culture areas, enriching his/her life through a mutual interconnectedness. The novel is divided into six parts; the narrator opens it with the first person where the narrator is presented as a character in the story narrative. In view of this, the discourse is free direct in person and tense, the narrator tries to observe the present, addresses from our own time. The narrator speaks in the name of the author, in the first person, thus, his/her presence from the first page, by speaking in the first person, is detached from the story, viewing it from our own time. The novel begins with a note of arrival- arrival of a female to London. London becomes a site of interpenetration of various cultural groups. From this time-space of 1986 to 2004, the novel ends the identity of the same geographical space. Apart from London, the plot includes Sudan. Although Najwa is the central character, the novel is woven around her life and relationships as she moves ahead in life and in space. She negotiates the tensions between different cultural contexts, and how she becomes a model of cultural hybridity.

Part one is narrated in the past tense, so the discourse is not direct. The narrator moved to Sudan where Najwa spent her adult life, she was at university in Khartoum and, as a rich and modernized Sudanese; she invaded her interior space of marrying and raising a family "I wanted to have children, a household to run" (124), struggled to narrate her personal and national dreams. "We went for holidays in Alexandria, Geneva and London. There was nothing I did not have, couldn't have. No dreams corroded in trust, no buried desire. And yet, sometimes, I would remember pain like a wound that had healed sadness like a forgotten dream" (15). Najwa lived a glamorous life, drove her car to university, wore too

short skirts and too tight blouses, imagined herself dancing with her beloved Anwar, and her mother used to organize gatherings. Suddenly, everything started to collapse and vanish, there had been a coup, her father was arrested and hanged, and Najwa's innocence was shattered. Consequently, Najwa had to travel to London to avoid the consequences of the revolution. Although, she was a member of the high elite, an upper-class female, but she had a feeling of being lost and her identity was fractured. Leila's protagonist has a vision; a vision to construct a free and transformative space, a space nullifies binary oppositions, particularly, between the Self and Other, the interior and the exterior, and the national and the transcultural. Consequently, Leila has deconstructed and defamiliarized the linear chronological narrative discourse by shifting the tense from present into past, using a denotative adverb of present time, "now", jumping between direct and indirect discourse. Thus the trajectory of the mobile time is given all at once, and all past and present is spread out instantaneously and simultaneously.

The narrator goes on describing Najwa's unhappy feelings in London. Part two is narrated in the present tense by Najwa as a first person narrator who is now in London working as a maid in Lamya's house-one of the Arab families who lives in London, "Lamya, my new employer, stands holding open the door of her flat. There is a light above her head and she is more relaxed than when I saw her at Regent's park mosque" (65). Najwa is isolated familially, socially and metaphysically. Thus, this is the beginning of the mystery and disruption of Najwa's world by otherness. Najwa's transcultural voyage arouses ambivalent traumas between cultures, people and identities. Yet the controversial manifestation of Najwa towards Otherness includes questions of identity, adaptation, and inclusion rather than exclusion in an alien culture. "My heart starts to pound as it always does where there is the threat that someone will know who I am, who I was, what I have become. How many times have I lied and said I am Eritrean or Somali?" (71) Such questioning negotiates Najwa's ontological process of losing identity, roots and routes. In effect, Najwa is a heterogeneous, multifaceted female; she experiences spatial, psychological, emotional and cultural dislocation and disruption between two hemispheres. In *Minerat*, she is trapped in a kaleidoscopic portrait of her tempestuous emotions; her personal feelings are topsy-turvy, like a frightened monkey in a cage. Hall (1996) maintains: "It accepts that identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation" (4).

Minaret is a massive *tour de force* that simply creates space. London is the cultural space of Najwa and when she is introduced to it for the first time, it symbolizes an invitation to explore this cultural space. This space is overlapped with a galaxy of cognitive challenges that disrupt narrative thinking to pursue the ontological quest of the self, thus the world of Najwa is to be disrupted by a kind of otherness. So the otherness is represented here by London. By spreading the story over spatial narrative thinking, the narrator, in part three, uses past tense

with first person narrator. In fact, the critical parallel between past and present, in other words, the third-person objectivity and first-person subjectivity of the narrative, is the first and foremost result of a mixture of temporalities. The narrator creates an idiosyncratic linguistic hybridity where the referent remains static and the signifiers point to change and transcultural space. Najwa's mother has died in London. Uncle Saleh tries to ease her agony and comforts her sadness, but she feels safe about being in London, and she doesn't want to immigrate to any other place. Despite her tragic situation, she thinks of the outer world, of the full space, the knowledge of freedom from being mingled with a different culture. The liberation of the self can only be accomplished by means of human action in the outer world. Najwa tries to gain and consolidate her subjectivity and self-conscious identity by constructing a new sense of home for herself in a new cultural space. "I felt silly sitting all by myself, self-conscious, it wouldn't be done in Khartoum for a woman to be a lone in a restaurant. 'I am in London,' I told myself, 'I can do what I like, no one can see me.' Fascinating. I could order a glass of wine. Who would stop me or even look surprised?" (128).

As Aboulela's narrative moves ahead, Najwa tries to carve out a space for her own freedom by rejecting reactionary traditional cultural practice, political and social backwardness and fundamentalism. "This empty space was called freedom" (175). Najwa emerges from this dark, empty, outer and inner space a different free woman of her own identity and reality. She is changed, liberalized and secular "I was a true Londoner now.... 'I know you are Westernized, I know you are modern, 'he said 'that is what I like about your independence' (176). Homi Bhabha states: "Cultural and political identity is constructed through the process of Othering" (1990: 219). In this sense, identities are continuously and constantly subjected to reconstitute, recreated, and reformed through a process of acculturation and deconstruction the dogmatic, theological and ideological stereotype. Aboulela brings out the contradictory positions of the shackles of freedom and the open space, the former negotiates the boundaries of home/nation and the latter to the new land of transcultural –both distinct cultural spaces that prescribe codes of being and becoming. Through this amalgamation, Aboulela goes back to culture and its practices in order to find ways to transcend its limits. The concept of limits is a concept of cultural spaces, it raises different questions to ask, different things to dream and desires of pushing the limits of narrative practices into spaces of coexistence and tolerance.

Minaret is replete with spatial metaphors, especially in the last three parts. These spatial metaphors intend to generate mutation, sense of belonging and stability. Najwa does not have stable identity; her journey is to negotiate her warped self, distorted desires and broken identity in a new process of self-discovery. She is forced to exile, leaves her national and original identity and accepts different culture and tries to accommodate herself. In this respect, Aboulela blurs the trajectory of narrative discourse and shapes the human experience against narrative template. Aboulela's aim is to lead Najwa into a horizontal change of her consciousness that produces forms of understanding and freedom to locate her own reality that exists outside a narrative-bound sense of

identity. Aboulela drives her protagonist into the mosque in hijab she adopts in which she finds consolation and relief. "The first time I walked into the mosque I saw a girl sitting by herself reciting Qur'an on her lap.... But still I wished I were like her, good like her. I wanted to be good but I wasn't sure if I was prepared" (237). Najwa wants to step out of the boundaries of the textual universe into the external world to bring about her transformation from fragmentation. Thus, the mosque becomes a spatial metaphor of spiritual cave, restoration of innocence, and purgation." I would leave the mosque refreshed, wide awake and calm, almost happy. May be I was happy because I was praying again-not like when I was young" (243). Both the mosque and hijab become the symbols of renewal, rebirth and rejuvenation, religious construct, Islamic faith and self-discovery. "I have changed, Anwar.... I am tired of having a troubled conscious. I am bored with feeling guilty" (244). Lawrence Grossberg maintains: "Identity is always a temporary and unstable effect of relations which define identities by marking differences. Thus the emphasis here is on the multiplicity of identities and differences rather than on a singular identity and on the connections or articulations between the fragments or differences" (1996: 89). Within this perspective, Najwa seeks to modulate ideas of change and liberalization out of fundamental and radical principles that govern religious and social values, ethics and morality. Her change is based on satisfaction, open space and freedom of choice. It is also related to inclusiveness of Islam and secularism, pluralism and liberalism. Hijab is not negative and pseudo identity, it is a referent to spirituality and faith that are so vital in Muslim culture. Consequently, Najwa goes to mosque and adopts hijab to find peace and tranquility. Her spiritual awakening to Islam has metamorphosed her a different self, a different identity and filled her empty space with catharsis and calmness.

Finally, *Minerat* moves in circles, the last part is narrated in present tense by first person narrator, thus, the continual juxtaposition between aspects of the past and the present are formed in one comprehensive way. According to this view, it is space that preserves and keeps the coherence and conjunction of events that are randomly dispersed in time. Space rediscovers and recovers lost identities and thus Najwa establishes a conception of the present as the "time of the now" that time past is contained in time present or that past, present and future all commingle under some horizon of negotiation. *Minerat* has no ending, no center, Najwa as a transformative girl has changed as a result of negotiating and experiencing transcultural spaces. Aboulela is concerned with negotiating spatial dislocations and she uses history and memory in her attempt to negotiate transculturality. She unlocks the secret space of the soul of her protagonist by immersing her into a new beginning, a new creation of a new space. Aboulela places Najwa in a dilemma of choices, but Najwa has decided to live the rest of her life in a flash of open spaces. Therefore, Najwa chooses the outer world, of the full space, of the knowledge and taste of freedom. The liberation of the self can only be accomplished by means of human action and experience in the outer world. She realizes that her journey into self must be undertaken. Her transformation and mutation will involve leaving behind self-deceit and

perceiving her potential future self, a changed and autonomous self undistorted by social conventions, fundamentalism, power, authority and hypocritical masks. Aboulela negotiates complex trans/intercultural scenes about the liberal of the individual and the freedom of choice through the act of narration. Wolfgang Iser believes that creative imagination is "shaped not by a single homeland, but by differing reference countries" (1999: 198). The dual affiliation aims to produce a unified image of the self despite internal cultural differences. These differences don't negotiate and create negative spaces; they try to build up a bridge of mutual understanding, external cultural similarities of coexistence, cultural integration, interpolation, and self-independence, freedom of belief and peculiarity of religion. In this respect, Najwa struggles to open up a space unbound by radical thoughts and conventions, strives to preserve her identity in an open space, accepts the Other and be accepted regardless of religion, culture, race, gender and color.

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