DISCERNING CULTURAL HOMOGENISATION: CRISIS OF IDENTITY AND SENSE OF UNBELONGING IN THE KINDNESS OF ENEMIES BY LEILA ABOULELA

Maryam Azman¹ and Ida Baizura Bahar²*
Department of English, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia
E-mail: azman.maryam@gmail.com¹; idabb@upm.edu.my²

ABSTRACT
Leila Aboulela, a Sudanese diasporic writer living in Scotland, is a prolific contemporary immigrant Muslim woman writer who has written notable fiction on the lives of female characters, who are also migrant Muslims, and their struggles to adapt to their new host countries. A contemporary novel by Aboulela, namely the historical fiction *The kindness of enemies* (2015), revolves around the protagonist, Natasha, and her crisis of identity and sense of unbelonging in Britain. While previous studies on the text have applied the framework of Islamic feminism in relation to the concept of topography (Idris & Zulfiqar, 2017), the concepts of history and cultural memory (Kershaw, 2017), postcolonialism (Almaeen, 2018), and the concept of history (Awad, 2018) in analysing the novel, the issues concerning Natasha’s crisis of identity and sense of unbelonging need to be further examined through the lens of cultural studies due to the gap in scholarship on this aspect of the novel. This study will apply the concept of cultural homogenisation by Stuart Hall (1992) which refers to the reduction of cultural distinctions to a phenomenon of global currency. Thus, the objective of this study is to examine how the author depicts Natasha’s adoption of the Western culture to acquire a sense of belonging in Britain through Hall’s concept of cultural homogenisation. The findings of this study reveal that the phenomenon of cultural homogenisation is present in Natasha’s adoption of the Western culture and also the eroding of her Sudanese and Muslim identities in her quest for a sense of belonging in Britain.

Keywords: cultural homogenisation; identity crisis; Leila Aboulela; sense of unbelonging; *The kindness of enemies*

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INTRODUCTION

Leila Aboulela (b. 1964) is a Sudanese diasporic writer living in Scotland. A contemporary immigrant female Muslim writer, she writes on the lives of female characters that are also migrant Muslims and their struggles to adapt to their new host countries. This recursive theme is to be found in her debut novel The translator (1999) as well as her later novels Minaret (2005), The kindness of enemies (2015) and Bird summons (2019). Aboulela has received several literary awards; for instance, she was the first winner of the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2000 and was long listed three times for the Orange Prize for Fiction in 2000, 2005 and 2011. Her novel Lyrics alley (2010) was the Fiction Winner of the Scottish Book Awards in 2012 and her collection of short stories Elsewhere, home (2018) won the Saltire Fiction Book of the Year Award in 2018. Born to an Egyptian mother and a Sudanese father in Cairo before moving to Khartoum as an infant and later to Aberdeen as an adult, her writing is generally a reflection of her own life experience (Leila Aboulela).

The historical fiction The kindness of enemies by Aboulela is written in two timelines, the past and the present. The present narrative revolves around the female protagonist, Natasha, and her crisis of identity and sense of unbelonging. She was born Natasha Hussein to a Russian mother and a Sudanese father in Khartoum. When she was still a child, her parents separated and she moved with her mother and stepfather to Scotland where she continues to live as an adult. As a child, Natasha felt indifferent towards her own mother with fair skin and straight blonde hair, a contrast to her own brown skin and dark curly hair. As an adult in Scotland, she feels insecure of her Sudanese and Muslim identities that she changes her last name and adopts a British lifestyle. Later, an encounter with a Muslim student, Oz, and his mother, Malak, concerning their ancestor Imam Shamil, a Muslim leader from the nineteenth century whom Natasha is researching, followed by her visit to Sudan to see her dying father, causes Natasha to continue questioning her identity and where she belongs.

There have been a number of notable literary studies on Aboulela’s The kindness of enemies. For example, a prominent study by Idris and Zulfiqar (2017) titled “Remapping London” investigates the relationship between topography and religion in Aboulela’s selected writings, focusing on how place setting influences the Muslim characters’ practice of Islam. Another study by Kershaw (2017), History, memory, and multiculturalism, applies the concept of genealogy in order to examine cross-cultural relations with regards to imperialism and the state violence. On the other hand, Spirituality and Islamic feminism by Almaeen (2018) explores “the religious agency of Muslim women as a product of the postcolonial ideological, historical and political factors that have shaped contemporary religious discourse, with a particular focus on Sufi” (p. vi). A recent study by Awad (2018) “Fiction in CONTEST with history” analyses how the historical content of the novel concerning Imam Shamil’s sufi jihadist movement influences the lives of the contemporary British Muslim characters in the novel.

Although there have been few literary studies which have analysed the novel, Aboulela’s The kindness of enemies has also been reviewed by notable academic resources and mainstream media publications. For example, a review published in the journal Transnational literature reaffirms that Natasha undeniably suffers from a dilemma of identity (Idris, 2016), while another review titled “Identity, place and a sense of disconnect” in Los Angeles Times, focuses on how the protagonist, Natasha, experiences a duality about her identity (Carroll, 2016). A more recent review titled “‘If Shamil were here today …’” published in Jordan Times, highlights how the author explores the issue of hybrid identities.
in the novel (Bland, 2018). In short, these noteworthy literary reviews reveal that the issues of identity and belonging are central to the novel but literary studies as discussed earlier have yet to explicitly focus on these issues. Thus, the objective of this study is to examine how the author depicts Natasha’s adoption of the Western culture in order to acquire a sense of belonging in Britain through the concept of cultural homogenisation from *Modernity and its futures* (1992) by the sociologist and cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1932-2014).

CULTURAL HOMOGENISATION AND IDENTITY

Cultural homogenisation, according to Hall, is one of the impacts of globalisation to the conception of identity. Cultural theorists claim that cultural homogenisation is eroding national identities when global identities are replacing the national ones. Prior to globalisation, societies are characterised by strong cultural identities. As globalisation arrives, these cultural identities are fragmented into new identities that feature multiplicity, difference and pluralism. Hall outlines three mediums in which cultural homogenisation can take place, namely global consumerism, international travel, and globally-networked media. As globalisation promotes global consumerism, international travel and globally-networked media, these three, in return, promote cultural homogenisation (Hall, 1992).

Global consumerism, or marketing, involves market flow between nations. In the process, it is not only goods that are being delivered from one place to another. More significantly, culture is also being flowed, creating the possibilities of shared cultures and identities among customers and clients who may be separated by space and even time. Furthermore, through the globally-networked media including television and radio, images and messages of a dominant culture are shared across audiences from different places and times. For example, people from a Third World country are able to receive the consumer culture from the West through their television screen. As a result, the cultural attire of the Western youth, among other things, is being adopted by the youth in this Third World country, with the aid of global marketing. Unfortunately, global consumerism, international travel and globally-networked media contain the risk of eroding national and cultural identities. As foreign cultural infiltration persists, it is hard for national cultures and cultural identities of a nation to be preserved (Hall, 1992). That being so, cultural homogenisation takes place, eroding the national identities.

Hall also states that globalisation, in regards to cultural homogenisation, is more likely to be a Western phenomenon than a global one, conflicting the idea of globalisation itself. In this sense, global consumerism, for instance, equals Westernisation with the trade of Western culture to the other parts of the world regarded as the periphery, from the Western perspective. On this matter, globalisation overlaps with power play and even colonisation because cultural homogenisation involves unequal cultural exchange between the West, namely the colonial centre, and the colonised periphery. The periphery becomes the receiving end of the Western culture while the West is presented with these alien and exotic cultures of the Other, only less significantly (Hall, 1992).

Regardless, it can be summarised that the facets of globalisation including global marketing, international travel and globally-networked media are heavily influencing the social life of modern societies today. Consequently, the notion of identity becomes detached. One particular identity is no longer attached to a particular culture, history, place and time. On the contrary, societies on a global scale are presented with a wide range of identities to choose from (Hall, 1992). Hall (1992) also calls this phenomenon “the cultural supermarket”
(p. 303). In a nutshell, cultural homogenisation occurs when identity, previously associated with cultural distinctions, becomes “reducible to a sort of international lingua franca or global currency into which all specific traditions and distinct identities can be translated” (Hall, 1992, p. 303).

**CULTURAL HOMOGENISATION IN NATASHA’S QUEST FOR BELONGING**

**Natasha’s Adoption of the Western Culture**

The Sudanese-born Natasha, who follows her mother and stepfather to Britain after her parents’ divorce, struggles to feel belonged in her new home country. Nonetheless, Natasha’s sense of unbelonging as well as identity crisis can be traced back to her childhood. Born to an African father and a Caucasian mother, Natasha grew up with confusion as to why she looks physically different from her mother. Natasha feels insecure with her brown skin and dark curly hair, a contrast to her mother’s white skin and straight blonde hair. The following excerpt shows Natasha’s sense of unbelonging and identity crisis as a result of her parents’ failed cross-cultural marriage:

I was a failed hybrid, made up of unalloyed selves. My Russian mother who regretted marrying my Sudanese father. My African father who came to hate his white wife. My atheist mother who blotted out my Muslim heritage. My Arab father who gave me up to Europe without a fight. I was the freak. I had been told so and I had been taught so and I had chewed on this verdict to the extent that, no matter what, I could never purge myself of it entirely. (Aboulela, 2015, p. 40)

When she moved to Britain, the pressure increases when Natasha learns that she has a last name that is foreign and controversial to the British society in general. Here, we argue that Natasha embraces the Western culture because she wants to feel belonged to the majority-white society, not discriminated because of her different ethnicity and inborn religion. The phenomenon of cultural homogenisation is present when Natasha, presented with all kinds of identities and cultures to choose from, decides to adhere only to the mainstream British or Western one, neglecting the Sudanese and Islamic practices:

Perhaps we half and halves should always make a choice, one nationality instead of the other, one language instead of the other. We should nourish one identity and starve the other so that it would atrophy and drop off. Then we could relax and become like everyone else, we could snuggle up to the majority and fit in. (Aboulela, 2015, p. 104)

The excerpt above shows how Natasha, in a dilemma between her newly-gained British identity and inborn Sudanese identity, thinks it is best to simply choose only one identity which is most likely the dominant one while neglecting the other, in order to fit in to the majority. The fact that it is the Western culture that she adopts echoes Hall’s (1992) view that “globalisation [in the form of cultural homogenisation] - though by definition something which affects the whole globe - may appear to be essentially a Western phenomenon” (p. 305). Natasha’s attitude is also quite similar to the attitudes depicted through two other female characters, Meena and Najwa, in Aboulela’s earlier novel *Minaret* (2005) as
discussed by Tripathy (2014) and Benguesmia (2019) in their studies. In analysing *Anita and Me*, Tripathy (2014) notes that “[Meena] wants to be with Anita and like Anita, a 13-year-old English girl who, she thinks, is her “passport to acceptance”” (p. 137). In her study, Benguesmia (2019) remarks that “[i]n *Minaret*, the identity of the protagonist [Najwa] has been marked by acculturation” (p. 37). Similar to Meena and Najwa, Natasha believes that she needs to embrace a British identity in regards to culture and lifestyle in order to be accepted in the British community.

Natasha’s adoption of the Western culture is largely marked by her decision to be rid of her Arabic and Muslim last name while inheriting her Scottish stepfather’s last name that is neutral of Sudanese or Islamic connotation:

I too had an unfortunate name; my surname. One that I nagged my mother and stepfather to change … ‘Imagine,’ I said, ‘arriving in London in the summer of 1990, fourteen years old, just as Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. Imagine an unfamiliar school, a teacher saying to the class, “We have a new student from Sudan. Her name is Natasha Hussein.”’ From the safe distance of the future, I joined my classmates in laughing out loud. (Aboulela, 2015, p. 4)

The excerpt above demonstrates that Natasha had decided to change her last name out of fear and shame that the name resembles a controversial figure; here, referring to the former Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein (1937-2006). In other words, Natasha is affected by the stereotype that the West attributes to the Muslims in general. Indeed, we denote how Natasha feels uncomfortable with her last name and, wishing to feel accepted in the community, she finds it wise to simply eliminate the name altogether. This evidence supports an earlier view by Almaeen (2018) who explains how the characters in the novel “have to alter their Arabic names in fear of negative association … Natasha Hussein changes her name to Natasha Wilson to avoid comparison to deceased Iraqi president Saddam Hussein” (p. 112). Here, we argue that the main reason behind Natasha’s decision of changing her last name is, as correctly described by Carroll (2016), “to blend in to a place where neither of her parents felt at home.”

Natasha’s adoption of the Western culture is also reflected through her lifestyle practices. The following excerpts describe the secular, non-Sudanese or non-Islamic lifestyle that Natasha adheres to:

“I ate the stodgy lasagne I had ordered and drank enough to shed a few sentimental tears over Yasha” (Aboulela, 2015, p. 105).

“On the way out of the café, I threw the pro-life leaflet into the bin. A friend once said to me, ‘You’re not the first or last woman to have had an abortion. Get over it’” (Aboulela, 2015, p. 139).

“On Oxford Street I joined the Christmas shoppers, looked at the window displays, wondering if I should buy new Sudan-friendly clothes, but I did not want to be stuck with them if my visa didn’t come through” (Aboulela, 2015, p. 213).
“The men were wearing turbans and loose trousers, the women in skirts with hijabs or, like Malak, in loose trousers and flowing tops. I was not the only one without anything on my head” (Aboulela, 2015, p. 217).

The first two excerpts show that Natasha indulges in the banned alcoholic drinks and the acts of premarital sex which do not adhere to the fundamental Islamic teaching. Meanwhile, the last two excerpts describe how Natasha does not adopt the Sudanese and Muslim cultural attire in her everyday life. In other words, the excerpts reveal that, due to her preliminary mission to feel belonged to the community, Natasha has adapted so well to the Western culture and lifestyle through her choice of cultural values. She dresses up and leads her life like any mainstream British hoping that other people would see her as a British and wishing that she is no different from the rest of the majority. This process of cultural homogenisation can be argued as a common phenomenon among migrants or those with diasporic background in their attempts to feel belonged to their host country. This textual evidence calls to mind another example from a study by Moss (2003) in analysing the novel White teeth (2000) by the contemporary British author Zadie Smith (b. 1975), who suggests a similar predicament experienced by a character in the novel, Irie: “[t]he angst ridden teenager [Irie] even endures near-torture in a hair salon in order to straighten her Jamaican-English hair for even just one day” (p. 14). In order to feel accepted in the community, these characters, with migrant backgrounds, find it necessary to follow the dominant culture, be it in terms of appearance or conduct.

In our view, Natasha’s adoption of the Western culture to acquire a sense of belonging is also influenced by the people she is surrounded with while growing up. Prior to the divorce, Natasha believed that her parents’ conflict was due to her father’s conduct of irresponsibility and negative attitude. As a result, her mother found fulfillment and happiness from another man, Tony Wilson, the Scottish who worked in Khartoum. Furthermore, Natasha does not have an affectionate relationship with her father. As a girl, she thought that she should look like her mother. Instead, she looks more like her father. In the midst of the conflict, Tony appeared as a form of rescue and, since then, Natasha began to look up to Tony. As a result, when she moved to Britain, Natasha found it necessary to adapt to the dominant culture to acquire her sense of belonging, in order to experience that unattained belonging she craves from her mother, and also to escape from being tethered to Sudan and Islam, the two things that she attaches to her father. In short, her childhood experience causes Natasha to associate the West with hope, optimism and a promise for a better future, while Sudan and Islam as distasteful. This perception in return, has influenced her decision to embrace the Western culture while abandoning the Sudanese and Islamic cultures.

The Eroding of Natasha’s Sudanese and Muslim Identities

As previously discussed, cultural homogenisation contains the risk of eroding one’s national or cultural identities (Hall, 1992). In Natasha’s case, as she adopts the Western culture to find a sense of belonging in her new home country, she also dismisses her inborn Sudanese and Muslim identities. Here, we suggest that the process of cultural homogenisation erodes Natasha’s Sudanese and Muslim identities. The eroding of Natasha’s Muslim identity, particularly, can be discerned when she finds it unnecessary to distinguish herself as a Muslim:
“Then a young girl in hijab asked, ‘Are you a Muslim?’ It was easy to dismiss the query as irrelevant, even silly. I laughed and that made her face flush with embarrassment” (Aboulela, 2015, p. 5).

“If I had been Dr Hussein, the girl wouldn’t have asked me if I were Muslim. And yet still I would have had to explain the non-Muslim Natasha. Better like this, not even Muslim by name” (Aboulela, 2015, p. 6).

Many Muslims in Britain wished that no one knew they were Muslim. They would change their names if they could and dissolve into the mainstream, for it was not enough for them to openly condemn 9/11 and 7/7, not enough to walk against the wall, to raise a glass of champagne, to eat in the light of Ramadan and never step into a mosque or say the shahada or touch the Qur’an … Many of the young Muslims I taught throughout the years couldn’t wait to bury their dark, badly dressed immigrant parents … They grew up reptiles plotting to silence their parents’ voices … (Aboulela, 2015, pp. 6-7)

In the first excerpt, Natasha mentions the irrelevance of needing to proclaim herself a Muslim. In the second excerpt, Natasha explains how her original surname is very much attached to Muslims and she dismisses that, by omitting that name, it makes things easier as people would not suspect her a Muslim and she, in return, does not have to prove that she is a Muslim. In the third excerpt, her cultural detachment from her own father’s identity is reflected through her own eagerness as well as those of other Muslim youth in Britain “to erase their Muslim identities” as posited by Carroll (2016). In order to adapt well to mainstream Britain, young Muslims, including Natasha, hide their Muslim identities, ashamed by their traditional Muslim ancestors whom they find to be old-fashioned and not Western enough. Furthermore, in the midst of Islamophobia, these young Muslims are eager to detach themselves from being labelled as Muslims, for fear that the other non-Muslims would treat them differently. This evidence corresponds to a view by Idris (2016, p. 1) who proposes that “[t]hrough Natasha, Aboulela discusses … the need of foregoing one’s indigenous beliefs in the face of societal pressures, and the conflicts caused by judgment on the basis of culture and religion.” In other words, societal pressures as well as religious stereotypes influence Natasha who is also driven by her quest for belonging, to let go of her religious identity. An earlier study by Alkarawi and Bahar (2013) on negotiating liminal identities in The girl in the tangerine scarf by another prominent diasporic female author, Mohja Kahf (b. 1953), also focuses on the process of in-betweenness experienced by the female protagonist, Khadra, in balancing her dual identities, either to conform to her Syrian Muslim identity or the American one; a similar dilemma which Aboulela has explored through Natasha’s characterisation. In addition, Natasha has also become unfamiliar with the Sudanese or Islamic cultures as a result of having to choose one identity over the other, namely the process of becoming detached from her own inborn self-identity:

“I followed her to the kitchen. It felt unusual to walk in my socks through a stranger’s house. Malak had asked me to take off my boots at the door and she herself was wearing light leather slip-ons” (Aboulela, 2015, p. 3).
“I sat next to him on the floor and it had been years since I had done that. My knees creaked and I shifted my heaviness on the carpet” (Aboulela, 2015, p. 43).

One tapestry took up the whole side of the sitting room, its large rugged words stitched in green … Whatever these letters symbolised was the reason men left the comforts of their homes for the collision of the battlefield … My childhood memory of the Arabic alphabet had become hazy and the letters were not easy to distinguish. (Aboulela, 2015, p. 3)

The excerpts above depict how the Sudanese or Islamic cultural traditions of taking off the shoes to enter the house and sitting on the floor have become foreign to Natasha. Natasha has also forgotten the Arabic language, one of her mother spoken languages apart from the Russian language. The excerpts indicate that, as a result of adapting so much to the mainstream British culture in order to feel belonged, Natasha is now estranged from the Sudanese and Islamic cultures. This textual evidence also calls to mind earlier perspectives by Al-Karawi and Bahar (2014) on how the individuality impasse experienced by the female protagonist, the Sudanese Muslim Najwa, in Minaret, negotiates the wearing of the veil and identity whilst living in London in order to cope with Islamophobia.

In our opinion, other than the fact that cultural homogenisation has indeed triggered the process of cultural identities to erode, Natasha’s indifference to her Sudanese and Muslim identities can be traced back to her perception of the West, Sudan and Islam in general. Aboulela’s depictions of Natasha’s childhood experience in Sudan when her parents were breaking up, as well as her cold relationship with her father, have shaped how Natasha perceives Sudan and Islam, which is the main religion in Sudan. On the other hand, as a daughter, she admires her Caucasian mother and also Tony who have taken her away from the bitter experiences in Sudan to the promised land of Britain. As a consequence, Natasha labels Sudan and Islam with pessimism while the West with optimism. Due to this reason, we argue that Natasha does not see why she needs to uphold her Sudanese and Muslim identities in Britain when she can simply be British or Western in order to cope with her identity crisis and acquire a sense of belonging within the British society.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined The kindness of enemies by Leila Aboulela by exploring the crisis of identity and sense of unbelonging experienced by Natasha, the female protagonist, through an application of the concept of cultural homogenisation by Stuart Hall. We have discovered that Aboulela depicts Natasha’s adoption of the Western culture as her attempt to acquire a sense of belonging in Britain. The phenomenon of cultural homogenisation is present when Natasha opts for the Western or mainstream British culture instead of the other culture inborn to her, namely the Sudanese culture. This adoption is highly marked by Natasha’s decision to eliminate her Arabic and Muslim last name Hussein, due to her anxiety of how the name resembles the former Iraqi Muslim leader, Saddam Hussein. This is because, at the height of Islamophobia, any references to Islam or Muslims have the potential of promoting negative perceptions. In order to avoid being viewed differently due to her Muslim name, Natasha found it best to change her last name so that people would treat her no differently from another white British and so that she can feel accepted and belonged to the British
community. Other than that, Natasha’s adoption of the Western culture is visible through the lifestyle that she leads. Natasha is described as being involved in non-Islamic practices, such as engaging in alcoholic consumption and engaging in premarital sex. She also does not follow the Sudanese or Muslim dress codes or attires. Through her appearance and conduct, Natasha has chosen to adhere to and practise the dominant culture in Britain, hoping to assimilate with the majority and feel a sense of belonging to them.

Aboulela also depicts Natasha’s attempt for acquiring a sense of belonging in her host country, Britain, through the confusion faced by Natasha as seen in the process of the eroding of her Sudanese and Muslim identities. In Natasha’s case, her identities as Sudanese and Muslim are eroding as a result of her choice to adopt only her British identity through her embracing of the Western culture. The eroding of Natasha’s cultural identities can be seen when she finds it irrelevant to proclaim her Muslim identity. Other than that, Natasha also becomes estranged from the Sudanese and Islamic cultures as a result of abandoning these two cultural practices and hence identities in order to make way for the British one. This estrangement includes her poor proficiency in the Arabic language which is actually one of her mother tongues. In other words, Natasha does not see the need to live up to her Sudanese and Muslim identities when she can simply be British and dissolve into the mainstream one in her attempt to feel belonged. This is indeed the depiction of a reduction of cultural distinctions of Sudanese and Muslim identities to a phenomenon of global currency, namely the Western cultural one.

As such, we can safely conclude that our study has been successful in examining Aboulela’s exploration of identity crisis and sense of unbelonging experienced by Natasha in The kindness of enemies by applying Hall’s concept of cultural homogenisation. We suggest then that future research may focus more on Aboulela’s other novels, namely The translator, Minaret, Lyrics alley, Elsewhere, home and her most current novel, Bird summons, by exploring whether the female protagonists in each novel also undergo the process of cultural homogenisation through the dilemma faced as migrant characters. It is also recommended for future research on character analyses in Aboulela’s novels to combine the conceptual framework of cultural homogenisation by Hall with another concept from trauma theory by the trauma theorist Dominic LaCapra (b. 1939); for instance, the concept of acting out and working through to investigate how the characters are portrayed as coping with their traumatic experience of migration, if any.

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