

Writing from the Margins of the Nation: Leila Aboulela's *Lyrics Alley*

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine how Arab British novelist Leila Aboulela represents a number of marginalized characters in a way that enables them to express their opinions about Sudan's imminent independence in her historical novel *Lyrics Alley* (2010). The novel, which is set in 1950s Sudan, focuses on mini narratives rather than on the grand narrative of independence and shows how the aspirations and disillusionments of these characters intertwine with debates and discussions about the future of the emergent nation. The voices of these characters vibrantly resonate throughout the novel in a way that draws attention to Fredric Jameson's provocative statement that third-world cultural productions are "national allegories". In a novel populated by heterogeneous characters whose differences in opinions and thoughts are tremendously influenced by their diverse socio-political backgrounds, the nation is defined, delineated and configured in infinite ways. In this sense, *Lyrics Alley* can be perceived as Aboulela's attempt to investigate, from the perspective of the less privileged, the history of Sudan and explore how the colonial era has tremendously influenced Sudan in the post-colonial era culturally, politically, economically, ideologically and socially. By giving a space for characters of different backgrounds to express their views and feelings on such a thorny topic, the novelist creates a platform for discussing, from varied angles, a topic that is almost always monopolized by politicians and upper class elites.

Keywords: Arab writers in diaspora, Fredric Jameson, Leila Aboulela, national allegory, Sudan

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Leila Aboulela is a British Arab novelist who uses English as a tool for writing. She grew up in Khartoum and lived much of her adult life in Scotland and now lives in Doha. Prior to *Lyrics Alley* (2010), Aboulela wrote two novels, namely, *The Translator* (1999) and *Minaret* (2005) and a collection of short stories titled *Coloured Lights* (2001). *The Translator* and *Minaret* portray characters whose Islamic beliefs greatly influence their perceptions about their identities and largely regulate their relationships with other characters and the societies in which they live. Both novels are set in Britain and depict the daily experiences of Muslim women who attempt to negotiate the terms and conditions of their existence and create a niche for themselves in a secular world that pays little attention to religious beliefs, values and mores. As Hassan (2008), Abbas (2011), Chambers (2011), Nash (2012) and Rashid (2014) illustrate in their discussions of these two novels, the two women suffer from a sense of displacement, unhomeliness and alienation and they ultimately find solace in Islamic faith which morally and psychologically nurtures the two characters by offering a sense of belonging that other forms of camaraderie fail to foster.

Lyrics Alley is thematically and structurally different from Aboulela's previous two novels. On the one hand, the novel is set in 1950s Sudan, the years that lead up to the nation's independence. In this novel, "the nation as a narrative," to borrow Homi Bhabha's words, intertwines with the ambivalent narratives of the characters who populate the novel (2000, p. 292). On the other hand, the novel explores the hopes and agitations of more heterogeneous characters whose social classes, gender, education, professions, ideological backgrounds, generation and citizenship status are varied. Specifically, while both *The Translator* and *Minaret* focus on the development of two female protagonists, Sammar and Najwa, respectively, *Lyrics Alley* is populated with more diverse characters whose expectations and disappointments are revealed in different chapters of the book. Each chapter is structured around the narratives of Mahmoud, Nur, Soraya, Ustaz Badr and Nabila who express their views, utter their judgments, and project their fears and hopes of the future as the nation marches into independence from the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium. In this sense, *Lyrics Alley* can be perceived as Aboulela's attempt to investigate, from the perspective of the less privileged, the history of Sudan and explore how the colonial era has tremendously influenced Sudan in the post-colonial era culturally, politically, economically, ideologically and socially.

The novel explores the psychological and socio-political implications of Sudan's imminent independence on a number of characters whose aspirations and disillusionments intertwine with debates and discussions about the future of the emergent nation. The discordance and cacophony created by the voices of these characters on the eve of independence summon up Fredric Jameson's controversial statement that third-world cultural productions are "national allegories". In a novel populated by heterogeneous characters whose differences in opinions and thoughts are tremendously influenced by their diverse socio-political backgrounds, the nation is defined, delineated and configured in infinite ways. In each chapter, the omniscient narrator focuses on the thoughts and quotidian experiences of one of the five main characters, initiating a colloquy in which the individual anatomizes his/her relationship with the emergent nation, gradually exposing and revealing its crudeness and complexity. By writing about her home land, Aboulela explores the socio-political context of a crucial period in Sudan's modern history and sheds light, albeit fictionally, on Sudan's chronic identity and political crisis.

The novel follows the mis/fortunes of the powerful and trade-minded Sudanese family of Abuzeid. The head of the family, Mahmoud Abuzeid who is married to two women, a Sudanese

and an Egyptian, is attempting to catch the wave of modernisation and technological revolution in an anticipation of expanding his business in the post-colonial era. A businessman with progressive outlooks, Mahmoud heavily invests in the education of Nur, his younger son from his first marriage. He is a promising student at the prestigious Victoria College in Alexandria and is in love with his cousin Soraya, the youngest of the three daughters of Mahmoud's widowed brother and business partner, Idris. Unlike Mahmoud, Idris is dull, lacks a vision and opposes Soraya's education. One summer, as Nur is swimming on the beaches of the Egyptian resort of Alexandria, a strong wave hits him and leaves him crippled. As his hopes for marrying his cousin fade away, his talent as a poet gradually emerges. In fact, people start to recite his poetry, unwittingly wrapping it in a nationalist and revolutionary aura. In other words, Nur's poetry which implicitly re-tells the story of his unfulfilled love to Soraya is interpreted by the listeners along nationalist lines and is believed to be "encoding anti-British [...] sentiment" and a yearning for the independence of Sudan from the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium (Sharkey, 2003b, p. 102).

As Sudanese people fervently debate the future of their country's relationship with Egypt, Mahmoud's Egyptian wife, Nabilah, feels uncomfortable living in the Sudanese town of Umdurman. For Mahmoud, Nabilah is a modern woman who fits into his plans of modernising his private and public life. However, Nabilah decides to return to Egypt, protesting against the barbarity with which her husband's first wife, Waheeba, has arranged to circumcise her daughter, Ferial. In fact, one is tempted to argue that the skirmishes between "Mahmoud's two warring wives," to use Aminatta Forna's words, reflect the restlessness of the relationship between Cairo and Khartoum in the public sphere in the 1950s (2010, para. 5). In the meanwhile, Mahmoud has recently become disgruntled because he is unable to find a proper medical treatment for his crippled son. Mahmoud's love for his son makes him deal leniently with Badr, Nur's Egyptian teacher, who has approached Mahmoud to lease an apartment in his new building. Badr's agitation at the residence allocated to him by the Sudanese government recapitulates his sense of unhomeliness in Sudan. He feels that he is an invisible person who lives on the margin of society and does not fit within the folds of the emerging nation. Badr's faith, however, guides him into enduring the hardships of displacement, alienation and marginalization.

The novel is based on a true story that was inspired by an accident that Aboulela's uncle, Hassan Awad Aboulela, incurred in 1948, but Aboulela "moved the date to 1951 so that it *would coincide with the progress of independence* in Sudan" and added fictitious characters and their plotlines (Tarbush, 2011, p. 7, italics mine). In other words, the changes that Aboulela has made show that the novelist is interested in investigating what independence means to the characters she depicts in the novel. As Tamara Sivanandan puts it, independence was perceived by the masses in Asia, Africa and elsewhere "in a spirit of a heady expectancy" (2004, p. 42). In this sense, the novel highlights how these characters view the imminent independence and how they experience the few remaining years under the Anglo-Egyptian administration. Specifically, the novel's "shifting viewpoints," to quote Anita Sethi's words on Aboulela's novel, "give fascinating insight into Sudanese society, with different characters embodying the dramatic clash between tradition and modernity" (2010, para. 2). For instance, the two brothers, Mahmoud and Idris, hold two different perspectives on the future of post-colonial Sudan. While Mahmoud "kept an open mind and a determination to go with the flow," Idris "was negative about Sudanisation and self-government" (Aboulela, 2010, p. 49). In other words, the two brothers offer two contradictory views on independence, a fact that vividly reflects the promise and challenge that Sudan's imminent decolonization invokes. In this sense, "independence" becomes

a heatedly-debated issue which permeates the novel and turns it into a forum for presenting the hopes and fears that “independence” may engender.

In *Living with Colonialism: Nationalism and Culture in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan*, Heather Sharkey describes Sudan after the re-conquest of 1898 by the Anglo-Egyptian armed forces as “a legal anomaly: a de jure territory of two countries, Great Britain and Egypt” (2003b, p. 4). Egypt, having itself been “occupied” in 1882 by Britain, “spent the Condominium period trying to shake Britain from the Nile Valley even while pressing claims to Egyptian authority over the Sudan” (p. 6). Sharkey maintains that Egypt’s role in Sudan was “mainly as a symbolic counterpoint to the British presence and as a source of encouragement for Sudanese resistance to British colonialism in the Nile Valley” (p. 6). As Egypt and Sudan were under British colonialist influence, the relationships between the Egyptians and Sudanese became more intricate and elaborate socially, economically, culturally and politically. The relationship between the two countries has a lasting impact on crystallizing an Egyptian national identity. As Eve Troutt Powell argues, “the Sudan helped Egyptians identify what was Egyptian about Egypt, in an idealized, burgeoning nationalist sense; yet one’s presence in the Sudan was an exile, a detachment from home in Egypt, a disgrace” (2003, p. 51).

In fact, the relationship between the two countries has come to the foreground before the British conquest of the two countries. In the nineteenth century, Egypt’s Turkish ruler, Mohammad Ali, managed to conquer Sudan and annex it to his “small empire” (Powell, p. 27). As Powell illustrates, Mohammad Ali’s “attempts to colonize the Sudan had great impact on the future of the Nile Valley and how Egyptians came to draw boundaries in their sense of nationhood and nationalism” (p. 27). Specifically, Powell argues that the work of Rifaah Rafi al-Tahtawi who has sown the first seeds of an Egyptian sense of nationalism, “set down on paper important tropes about the Sudan, a place he despised yet considered intrinsic to the territorial and historical integrity of Egypt” (p. 23). In fact, some of the remarks made about Sudan by Egyptian characters in *Lyrics Alley* seem to reflect al-Tahtawi’s thoughts as will be illustrated later. In this sense, the novel highlights the fact that Egyptians have contributed to delineating Sudan socially, economically, politically and culturally.

Seen through this lens, the marriage of upper class Sudanese merchant Mahmoud Abuzeid to middle class young Egyptian Nabilah in *Lyrics Alley* is something of a common and widespread phenomenon. Equally prevalent is Mahmoud Abuzeid’s marriage to his Sudanese cousin, Waheeba, who after her husband’s marriage to Nabilah resigns herself to the quarters of the mansion the family owns in Umdurman. As Alessandra Rizzo puts it, “Sudan and Egypt are two antagonistic *women* - represented by Waheeba and Nabilah - in Aboulela’s narrative space” (2012, p. 173, italics in original). Along with his ancestral and trade links to Egypt, Mahmoud Abuzeid literally and symbolically connects the two countries in the novel and brings into the picture the ongoing discussion on the nature of the future political relationships between the two neighboring countries. His grandfather immigrated to Sudan in the early 1800s, “fleeing conscription in the Egyptian army” (Aboulela, 2010, p. 40). He is married to a Sudanese woman and an Egyptian woman, and hence, for him the relationship between Sudan and Egypt is a public and private affair. According to C. E. Rashid, “the metropolitan Nabilah [...] and traditionalist Waheeba [...] characterize the simultaneous rivalry and inseparability of the two cultures” (2012, p. 615). On the one hand, Mahmoud believes that the Egyptians and the Sudanese are “historically, geographically and culturally tied” (Aboulela, 2010, p. 195). His relationship with his two wives is greatly influenced by the relationship between Sudan and Egypt which is not unaffected by British colonialist policies in the Nile Valley. While Mahmoud

associates his Sudanese wife, Waheeba, “with decay and ignorance,” “the stagnant past,” “crudeness,” he affiliates his Egyptian wife, Nabilah, with “the glitter of the future” and “sophistication” (p. 45). In short, Mahmoud and Sudan’s prospects are inextricably tied. He feels that the “misery” of his country is his and serving his nation fill[s] him with the satisfaction that he was contributing to his country’s progress” (p. 268).

The comments that Rizzo and Rashid make on how the relationship between Nabilah and Waheeba mirrors that between Egypt and Sudan in the 1950s draws our attention to Jameson’s provocative stipulation that third-world cultural texts are national allegories “where the telling of the individual story and the individual experience cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the experience of the collectivity itself” (Jameson, 1986, p. 86). The novel foregrounds the definition of Sudan as an emergent nation. The setting of the novel and the diversity of the socio-political backgrounds of the main characters in the novel raise questions about the citizenship status of some of these characters and whether or not they fit in the structure of the embryonic nation. Just as these characters struggle to find a niche for themselves in the new era of independence and to outline the contours of their identities in a world of changing mores, they also cope with colonialism and destabilise it. In other words, British colonialism, to borrow Sharkey’s words on how colonialism has influenced Sudanese nationalism and Sudanese officials, has “got under their skin” [...] It irked them [...] but most of the time they lived with it” (Sharkey, 2003b, p. 109).

While *Lyrics Alley* depicts the life of a nation under British colonialist administration, it attempts to complicate the definition of a nation by centralizing the narratives of marginalized characters. The diversity of the socio-political backgrounds of the characters makes hard to view the nation as a homogenous body politic. The characters are diverse and so are their expectations about the nation. According to Amir Idris, Sudan’s transition from colonialism to political independence marks the start of a “political conflict over the identity of the postcolonial state,” throwing the country in “a national identity crisis” (2005, p. 44). As the novel ardently portrays the hopes, expectations, fears and disappointments of a host of characters who are socially and politically dissimilar, it also highlights both the failure of the nation as a political unit that ostensibly represents people. As independence becomes nearer and politicians stake their claims for representing the nation, Aboulela creates a fictitious space in which the narratives of marginalized characters are centralized. In the novel, to borrow Ania Loomba’s words on Spivak’s provocative question “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Aboulela “make[s] visible the importance of subalterns without necessarily suggesting that they are *agent* of their own histories” (2005, p. 203, italics in original).

As the characters voice out their thoughts on the future of Sudan and its thorny relationship with its northern neighbor, Egypt, they concurrently express their fears, anxieties, hopes and expectations about the future. Their responses and reactions to the ongoing events can be viewed as an *unofficial* national dialogue which supplements and simultaneously destabilises the dialogue politicians and partisans are actively involved in. As the novel vividly portrays these episodes, one thinks of Jameson’s argument on the nature of third world literature. Jameson argues that:

All third-world texts are necessarily, I want to argue, allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call national allegories, even when, or perhaps I should say, particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel. (1986, p. 69)

In fact, Jameson insists that even third-world texts that are “seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic - necessarily project a political dimension in the form of a national allegory” (p. 69). In third world literature, Jameson maintains that “the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society” (p. 69). He concludes that “third-world national allegories are conscious and covert” (p. 69).

To illustrate, in the novel, Soraya is preoccupied with the socioeconomic and political changes that Sudan's imminent independence is expected to engender. As she re-visits her school one afternoon, her memories about childhood mix with her outlooks about how British colonialism has shaped her identity and those of millions of her compatriots:

Soraya walked around the empty, shady courtyard. She could hear the faint drone of the teachers in various classrooms, and the younger students chanting out their times tables. Part of her grievance against British rule, she had come to learn in university, was how they established missionary schools to undermine and lead astray the Muslim population. (Aboulela, 2010, p. 247)

As the above quotation demonstrates, a public issue encroaches on Soraya's private world. In other words, Soraya's solitary walk around the courtyard of her childhood school turns into a contemplation on how British colonialism has had left everlasting marks on millions of the Sudanese via its educational policies in colonial Sudan. In this sense, this episode seems to confirm Jameson's words and validates his stipulation on the nature of third world literature.

Several critics have taken different positions in response to Jameson's provocative statement. Some critics, including Spivak, argue that “Jameson's desire to allegorize produces allegory's most dangerous tendency: moving towards a single, overarching, even totalizing meaning” (Tambling, 2010, p. 156). Aijaz Ahmad's response is by far the most powerful and radical response to Jameson's argument as Ahmad dismisses Jameson's theory as a “positivist reductionism,” and accuses Jameson of “homogenization” and submerging “the enormous cultural heterogeneity of social formations within the so-called third world [...] within a singular identity of ‘experience’” (1987, pp. 4-10). Other critics, like Michael Sprinker, have demanded that the national question should be situated “within the context of international determinations that exceed the limits imposed by the nation and national culture” (1993, p. 28). Imre Szeman, on the other hand, argues that the concept of national allegory “suggests a number of things about how we should think about postcolonial or third world texts in the context of the period of decolonization and globalization” (2001, pp. 812-813).

The above argument foregrounds the fact that the relationship between an individual and the nation is convoluted and multifaceted. As Homi Bhabha points out, “the people are both the historical ‘objects’ of a nationalist pedagogy [...] and] the ‘subjects’ of a process [...] by which the national life is redeemed and signified as a [...] reproductive process” (2000, p. 297). In other words, the daily experiences of people practically define the outlines of a nation and turn it into a recognizable entity. However, in the post-colonial era, as Sivanandan reminds us, “the dreams of what independence would bring seem misguided in retrospect” as these states have failed “to attain hoped-for social and economic freedoms for their peoples” (2004, p. 42). Bhabha's words help contextualize Aboulela's decision to set her third novel on the eve of Sudan's independence as the novel investigates the various characters' opinions, attitudes, plans and hopes about independence. The divergent and discordant voices that one hears in the novel demonstrate the complexity and malleability of the definition, nature and limits of the nation-state. By giving a space for characters of different backgrounds to express their views and feelings on such a

thorny topic, the novelist creates a platform for discussing, from varied angles, a topic that is almost always monopolized by politicians and upper class elites.

As Idris reminds us, in Sudan, "history has always been associated with the institutions of the state and the ruling elites" (2005, p. 16). Idris elaborates:

Therefore, in the case of the Sudan, we have to distinguish between two types of history: official history, which tends to be institutionalized by state policy, and the subaltern histories of those who are excluded from the state. While the former consolidates and justifies the existing nation-state, the latter seeks to question its legitimacy by reconstructing and reinterpreting the subaltern. (2005, p. 16)

Idris's words help understand the socio-political backdrop of *Lyrics Alley*. By focusing on mini narratives rather than on the grand narrative of independence, Aboulela efficiently employs Idris's paradigm of "the multitude of levels of history" which, Idris insists, helps clarify "the relationship among history, identity, and conflict in the Sudan" (p. 18). The mini narratives that the novel valorizes offer alternative histories that undermine the official one. Aboulela's novel, to quote Loomba once again, positions the articulation of these divergent, yet marginalized, voices "with each other and with other social forces" (2005, p. 200). By contextualizing these narratives, the novel uncovers untold and suppressed histories.

Since its publication late 2010, the novel has received a discernible interest by reviewers. Most reviews commend Aboulela's ability to "dra[w] her wonderfully rich characters" (Yassin-Kassab, 2011, para. 8), while few complain that Aboulela's book "does not echo the present" since it is set in "a world of rosy nostalgia" (Qualey, 2011, para. 1). In addition to these reviews, two academic articles have investigated the aesthetic and thematic richness of this novel. Alessandra Rizzo describes *Lyrics Alley* as "a translated narrative space, where characters lead a nomadic existence within African states" (2012, p. 178, emphasis added). Rizzo's analysis of *Lyrics Alley* locates the novel within a vibrant world of immigration, cultural encounters and hybridity. However, Rizzo's reading of the novel seems to come short of explaining Aboulela's choice of Sudan's imminent independence as the backdrop of her narrative. In addition, Rizzo's emphasis on the Africanness of Egypt and Sudan eclipses the fact that the two countries are Arab countries and that the debate on the Arabness of Sudan has been a central issue in discussions about the identity of Sudan before and after its independence as illustrated in the first few pages of this research.

The other academic article that has explored *Lyrics Alley* so far is by Eva Hunter. In her article, Hunter analyzes Aboulela's representation of male and female Muslims who have faith. Specifically, Hunter contrasts the dullness and servility of Najwa in *Minaret* with the liveliness and self-confidence of Badr in *Lyrics Alley*. Hunter argues that Aboulela advocates for her female characters of faith "an Islamic form of quietism, their withdrawal dovetailing with patriarchal views of the virtuous conduct required of women" (2013, p. 97). On the other hand, Hunter claims that Badr, the male character who has faith, is "particularly fitted to exercise the role of spiritual and moral model in Sudan" (p. 96). Despite the interesting comparison between Najwa and Badr, Hunter does not seem to notice that Badr has had his fair share of anguish and pain as a foreigner living in Sudan. In fact, at one point, Badr himself notes that he is an invisible man among the rich people of Khartoum. When he visits Mahmoud at his mansion, Badr stands "unnoticed" by Sudan's most important men (Aboulela, 2010, p. 18). Badr acknowledges that "he was not one of them [...] nor should anyone rise up to greet him" (p. 18). Rather than "possess[ing] intellectual and spiritual superiority that compensates for his material poverty" as

Hunter claims (p. 97), Aboulela presents Badr as a vulnerable person whose contributions to building the nation are eclipsed by his nationality as an Egyptian.

Indeed, as the characters express their thoughts about the country's ongoing affairs, including the prospects of the Egyptian-Sudanese ties, the novel turns into a popular debate on an issue from which the views of marginalised people, like Badr, are usually unaccounted for. In a novel that is set on the eve of independence, to use Bhabha's words, "there emerges a more instantaneous and subaltern voice of the people, a minority discourse that speaks betwixt and between times and places," making its claims on the national community (2000, p. 309). Of the five characters that each chapter alternately concentrates on, four can be easily recognized as social and political pariahs; people who are excluded from voicing their opinions about a crucial issue like independence and the prospects of the future nation-state. While Mahmoud, the prominent Sudanese merchant, can be seen as part of the mainstream, and hence, his thoughts are accommodated in a nation-wide discourse on the future of the country, characters like Nur, Soraya, Badr and Nabilah are practically excluded from the national dialogue by virtue of their physical disability, gender, social status, and citizenship status, respectively. Nevertheless, through narrating their stories, these four people participate in the ongoing *unofficial* discussion about independence and the future of the relationship between Sudan and Egypt. In this sense, the novel, "uncovers the multiplicity of narratives that were hidden by the grand narratives" (Loomba, 2005, p. 200).

At one point, Nur seemed to be the natural inheritor of the Abuzeid family's wealth. He was actually preparing himself to play a pivotal role in directing the family's business *after independence*. Nur and Soraya have already made up their minds about their future life style: they perceive themselves as community leaders who will induce social changes in the post-colonial era. In Sudan, just like in other African and Asian countries during the period of decolonization and right after independence, "the possibilities for independent social, economic, and political development seemed within reach," to quote Sivanandan once again (2005, p. 55). Nur and Soraya, in fact, have already started a revolution against the old generation, ridiculing, for instance, Idris's narrow-mindedness and male chauvinism. When Soraya complains to Nur that her father has disallowed her from going to the university, Nur criticizes his uncle's short-sightedness (p. 153). Nur's criticism of his uncle's position is, in fact, a comment on the position taken by Sudanese elites and colonial authorities on the subject of the education of women. As Sharkey notes, "Females had no place at Gordon College, nor was education providing basic literacy easily accessible to girls throughout the colonial period" (2003b, p. 8). Sharkey argues that, "[t]he conservatism of Northern Sudanese society" and "the reluctance of British officials to spend scarce funds on [...] girls' schools, stifled the development of girls education until late in the colonial period" (2003b, p. 8).

Hence, Nur's relentless sardonic mimicry of his uncle's conservatism represents the criticism of male-chauvinist mentality on a national issue which was hotly debated particularly in post-colonial Sudan. Before Nur capitulates to his fate as handicapped as a result of a diving accident on the beach of Alexandria, Nur has frequently attended poetry readings that ignite nationalist and patriotic feelings. He shares his thoughts and feelings about this approaching historic moment with his beloved Soraya: "It's the time we're living in; everyone [is] talking about self-determination and independence" (Aboulela, 2010, p. 12). Nur and Soraya "were stirred by the patriotic sentiments that the poem aroused [... They] carried a strong sense of their Sudanese belonging. Their glittering future was here, here in this southern land" (Aboulela, 2010, p. 12).

Even after the accident, Nur still feels that “[h]e wants to be the hero of his own life. He wants to do, to reach, to contribute” (Aboulela, 2010, p. 161). Bedridden, Nur unburdens his mind by writing poetry about his beloved, Soraya. Paradoxically, his love poetry is misinterpreted by his fellow citizens as a *national allegory* of the current political relationship between Sudan and Egypt. In one of his poems, Nur ascribes to the accident incurred on the beach of the Egyptian resort of Alexandria his perpetual pain, literally referring to his status quo as handicapped. But, living in an environment replete with nationalism and patriotism, some Sudanese people read this poem as a nationalist call for ending Egyptian presence in Sudan since the former is the source of Sudan’s pain:

One day on campus Soraya passed a ‘Sudan for the Sudanese’ rally and stopped to listen. The speaker was adamant in his rejection of any kind of Egyptian influence over a future, independent Sudan. He spoke with passion and serious purpose, then, as if to change tactics, he smiled and said, “‘Haven’t you heard the poet say *In you Egypt is the cause of my troubles?*’” (Aboulela, 2010, p. 244, italics in original)

The uncanny act of misreading Nur’s poem as a national allegory conflates the private with public, the literal with the metaphoric, and unwittingly, centralizes the marginalized. Overnight, a handicapped amateur poet becomes a nationalist hero. In short, Nur’s poetry, to quote Qualey, becomes “an anthem for Sudanese independence” (2011, para. 2).

Just like Nur, Soraya thinks that she has a role to play in the nascent nation. Buoyed by her family’s richness, her uncle’s boundless support and Nur’s sincere love for her, Soraya plans to be at the forefront of the nation, pursue her higher education and push forward the wheel of progress in her country. Soraya’s future seems intertwined with that of the nascent nation. In this way, Soraya’s “psychology, or more specifically, libidinal investment, is to be read in primarily political and social terms” as Jameson reminds us of how third world texts project a political dimension in the form of a national allegory (1986, p. 69). Although she enrolls in the medicine school and marries a Western-educated man, Soraya’s dreams of freedom and progress, like those of her nation, remain unfulfilled. Soraya’s position is not dissimilar from the few other Sudanese girls who pursued their higher education after school. According to Lilian Sanderson, Sudanese girls who attained university education “often lived in two diametrically opposed worlds - the emancipated one of the College and their home environment, where their newly-developed spirit of independence was often regarded as tantamount to impertinence” (1968, p. 150).

Soraya wants to challenge what she sees as stagnant Sudanese traditions that render her inefficient, invisible and insignificant. She loves her country, but she loves to be in Egypt where she “[does not] have to wear a tobe in Cairo” (Aboulela, 2010, p. 4). Her admiration of Nabilah, her uncle’s Egyptian wife, is an admiration of a modernity she desires to bring home: “Nabilah was everything that Soraya considered modern” (p. 9). She is eager to discuss the political situation in her country with her elders (p. 158). When she is not allowed to attend nationalist poetry readings, she is about to cry “because exciting, transforming things would happen and she would only hear about them and not be part of them” (pp. 12-13). Shortly, she “want[s] to be at the centre of everything” (p. 13). Unlike her older sisters, Soraya is conscious of the responsibility she has to shoulder once the new era commences. She even envisions how her sisters “would do her housework for her and look after her children while she went to work” (p. 13). For Soraya, “work” means helping build the nation on solid grounds, a mission that Badr has heftily and wholeheartedly contributed to, but Nabilah has been unaware of.

Although Badr and Nabilah are Egyptian, socially and culturally they are a world apart. In addition, the two have different positions vis-à-vis Sudan. While Badr clearly sees and cherishes the role he plays in building the nascent nation, Nabilah's vision is at best myopic as she insulate herself in an Egyptian-spun cultural cocoon. Badr, a teacher of Arabic language, is quite happy at his presence in Sudan because it is "an opportunity to make the kind of savings he would never have made had he stayed in Upper Egypt" (p. 16). Fortified with a strong religious affiliation and a belief in Allah's continuous support for him, Badr feels comfortable in Sudan despite his wife's recurrent complaints about "the Sudanese-style house they had been allocated by the school" (p. 17). Badr constantly meditates on the future of the relationship between Sudan and Egypt and is aware of "the rumours that the British would thwart a union with Egypt", and hence, Egyptians in Sudan may be forced to leave the country. However, being a devout Muslim, Badr "does not despair in Allah's mercy" (pp. 56-57). In fact, his faith makes him feel comfortable in Sudan, experiencing "more benign spirits" (p. 58).

Badr's thoughts about Sudan are mixed: while he believes that as an educated man he needs to help the Sudanese out of their superstitions, Badr views Sudan itself as a magical place where reality can easily get distorted:

The Sudanese needed rescuing from superstition and deviation – this was why the Shariah judges were Egyptians and why it was important for Badr to be here, to teach Arabic and Religious Education [...] A place where reality was slippery and fantasy could take over the mind, a place of wayward spirituality, a place where the impossible and the romantic pulsed within reach. (pp. 60-61)

Badr believes that his presence in Sudan is ordained by Allah and that as an educated Egyptian, he has a mission to fulfill: to build the nascent nation and to disseminate Arabic language and Islamic teachings. At one point, Badr bemoans Egypt's lack of influence in Sudan: "We could have spread Islam further [...] squashed the seeds of religious deviation with more vigour [...] nurtured and taught Arabic and enlightened" (p. 296). In short, he feels that he has a responsibility towards Sudan, that this new nation needs guidance and support and that it is Allah's mandate for him to be there and to contribute to Sudan's progress. In this sense, Badr seems to have developed an attachment to Sudan that transcends political borders, national origins and social status.

On the other hand, Nabilah, the other Egyptian character in the novel, does not feel that her presence in Sudan is of any significance. Nabilah's isolation and alienation are aggravated and aggrandized by her refusal to adapt to the new circumstances. Nabilah wraps herself in a cocoon woven of Egyptian cultural artifacts: "Nabilah surrounded herself with the sights, accents and cooking smells of Egypt" (p. 25). As Tarbush succinctly puts it, "Nabilah's feelings of Egyptian superiority over Sudan lead her to feel some revulsion even at her own children's Sudanese looks" (p. 7). When in Egypt, Nabilah feels at ease because she is "just another Egyptian lady" (Aboulela, 2010, p. 93), but in Sudan even her clothes, "highligh[t] her position as an outsider" (p. 95). In what can be seen as an allegory of the tense political relationship between Egypt and Sudan, quite often, Nabilah skirmishes with Waheeba. It is not surprising that the spat between the two women over domestic affairs is wrapped in a nationalist aura and drawn along the two countries' borderlines.

On the one hand, Nabilah's views on Sudan are replete with stereotypes long established within Egyptian cultural life: "For Nabila, the Sudan was like the bottom of the sea, an exotic wilderness, soporific and away from the momentum of history" (p. 24). To a large extent, Nabilah's views of Sudan are similar to those of Rifaah Rafi al-Tahtawi in a poem he wrote to

lament his "exile" in Sudan. In the poem, al-Tahtawi "offer[s] stark images of hateful Sudanese, to whom he attributed no tribe, no religion, no language, no identity except that of slave or 'a blackness in a blackness in a blackness'" (Powell, 2005, p. 54). On the other hand, Waheeba depicts Nabilah as an outsider, an unwanted intruder or even an invader. Waheeba's assault on Nabilah is quite telling: "We were living well before you came from your country; we had nothing to complain of" (Aboulela, 2010, p. 175). Waheeba, a staunch believer in Sudanese traditions and customs, including female circumcision, defines her identity as Sudanese by marking Nabilah as an outsider whose lifestyle is incongruent with Sudanese traditions and customs. Waheeba, to quote Bhabha on how the political unity of the nation is set up, draws the borders of Sudan as "a signifying space [... by invoking] the patriotic, atavistic temporality of Traditionalism" (2000, p. 300).

Nabilah refuses to listen to her mother and grandmother who insist that Sudan and Egypt are culturally linked. Her mother asserts that "Sudan [... is] like a southern province, an extension of Egypt" (p. 182). Her grandmother tells her that "Sudan and Egypt are one country" and advises her to change and to "become different" for her children's sake (p. 98). It is only when Nabilah travels with her husband to Britain that she feels "unrestricted by the demands of Egyptian versus Sudanese culture" (p. 177). Their marriage, one is tempted to say, is inseparable from the ongoing political, cultural, social and economic issues that bind the three countries: Sudan, Egypt and Britain. When Soraya visits Nabilah in her flat in Cairo, "Nabilah was taken aback" because now she realizes that she was loved, respected and admired by her Sudanese family (p. 285). Nabilah finds out that her refusal to interact with her community has blinded and isolated her. She now comprehends that "[I]f in Sudan would have had a meaning if [she] had been able to make a difference, if she had thrived as a role model, as a champion of progress, as a good influence" (p. 286). In short, Nabilah realizes that she, too, has a role to play in building the new nation. Just like Badr, she can help improve life standards in the country of her children. In this sense, Nabilah perceives of herself as a Sudanese subject whose "*destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*" to quote Jameson (1986, p. 69, italics in original).

In *Lyrics Alley*, the private lives of the characters intertwine with the public sphere of the emergent nation. What Jameson has "identified as the primacy of national allegory in third-world culture" (1986, p. 84) provides a key to contextualising Aboulela's novel. *Lyrics Alley* depicts the experiences of numerous characters whose perceptions and their positions in the nation are dissimilar. Although the characters in this novel are socially, economically, politically and ideologically diverse and heterogeneous, each character seems to be involved in nation building; each responds to ongoing debates on self-determination and independence and has plans for the future. As these characters move in the space of the novel, they articulate their hopes, disillusionments, fears and worries about the future. The divergent views and discordant voices that we hear in the novel present the nation, to quote Bhabha, as "a space that is internally marked by cultural difference and the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities, and tense cultural locations" (2000, p. 299). In presenting the narratives of Nur, Soraya, Badr and Nabila, Aboulela seems to accept the "circumscribed task" which Spivak has proposed that intellectuals "must not disown with flourish" (1988, p. 104). As the novel gives voice to the less-privileged and marginalised, it opens new spaces for these characters to re-define the nation and re-configure its constituents, further explicating its fluidity and malleability.

About the author

Dr. Yousef Awad obtained his PhD from the University of Manchester, UK, in 2011. Since then, he has been working as assistant professor at the University of Jordan and published a monograph on Arab writers in diaspora titled *The Arab Atlantic*. He also published a number of articles that explore a range of themes like cultural translation, identity and multiculturalism in the works of Arab writers in diaspora.

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