

Cosmopolitan Ethics and the Politics of Religious Identity in Leila Aboulela's Novels: an Interdisciplinary Perspective



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ABSTRACT: Leila Aboulela is a prolific Anglophone Muslim writer whose narratives inscribe in the postmodernist tradition of literary production. She engages with Muslim religious identity renegotiations in a transnational imaginary space. Literary critics consider her writings as an arduous write back to the underpinning discourses of Islamophobia, which gained momentum in the metropolitan cities of the West in the aftermath of 9/11. In doing so, Leila Aboulela overstates the religious identity at the expense of other forms of affiliation and identity. In my thesis, I will invite philosophers of cosmopolitanism across disciplines to account for the inverse relationship between constructing religious identity and cosmopolitan ethics.

KEYWORDS: Cosmopolitan ethics, interdisciplinarity, identity, religion.

Cosmopolitanism has gained prominence in political and moral philosophy and has been celebrated in other disciplines such as law, politics and sociology. The concept of cosmopolitanism is a multilayer phenomenon with multiple meanings and is usually positioned at the intersection of moral, political, and socio-cultural perspectives; therefore, any conceptual tool to study or analyze cosmopolitanism must be interdisciplinary. My dissertation aims partly to examine these ambivalent dimensions of cosmopolitanism through an interdisciplinary approach rooted in the study of literary texts written by the Anglophone Muslim writer Leila Aboulela in the light of theories advanced by contemporary sociopolitical philosophers such as Anthony Appiah, Martha Nussbaum, Seyla Benhabib and Ulrich Beck.

Conceptualizing Cosmopolitanism from an interdisciplinary perspective will definitely foster a fruitful cross-level understanding of the concept. Therefore, I opt for an interdisciplinary analysis of the question of Cosmopolitan Ethics in the renegotiations of religious identity in the works of Leila Aboulela. Accordingly, Klein and Newell (1997) define interdisciplinarity as "a process of answering a question, solving a problem, or addressing a topic that is too broad or complex to be dealt with adequately by a single discipline or profession [...] and draws on disciplinary perspectives and integrates their insights through construction of a more comprehensive perspective"(393-394).

Similarly, Bishnupriya Ghosh (2004) argues that "Contemporary literary production cannot be accommodated within 'self-evident literary traditions' and that 'no consolidated vocabulary emerges for considering these texts together as a distinctive literary practice' (43). We may conclude that only an interdisciplinary take on the concept of cosmopolitan ethics will suffice to capture the evasiveness and overflowing of the subject understudy.

In this ardent attempt to demystify the logic and the dynamics of how individuals belong physically and morally to entities such as the nation and the community, I started with retracing the genealogies of the concept of citizenship, which revolves principally around two main criteria: entitlements and obligations. That is to say, the relationship between the individual and the nation or community requires the individual to engage in a reciprocal model of give and take deal. The community grants the individual legal, civil and socioeconomic rights in exchange for a set of obligations of allegiance and belonging. Still, and throughout this journey, I often come across various challenges of evolving nature and importance. Since the world is witnessing an overlapping of borders and identities, it is no longer feasible to define oneself within the borders of a single nation or identity. Henceforth, individuals can extend their allegiances to broader transnational communities of either faith or interest. Accordingly, subjects may now have obligations to fellow citizens from far away enclaves on the far side of the world. That is to say, world citizens strive to live in the cosmopolitan condition.

It is now clear that investigating genealogies of cosmopolitan ethics amid this hype of layers of meanings of the concept of cosmopolitanism would obstruct our delving into the most interesting dimensions of citizenship, which are transnational and

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borderless. Cosmopolitans conceive of themselves as citizens of the world; therefore, they sense an obligation to make the world a better place for other citizens beyond geographical and communitarian confines.

No wonder cosmopolitan ethics fascinate philosophers, socio-political thinkers and authors across disciplines. They mainly theorize about cosmopolitanism to highlight the lack of hospitality and compassion, which should bind all world citizens to peace and prosperity. Nevertheless, cosmopolitanism remains one of the most controversial concepts, for it is ultimately about a utopian optimism for a world of conviviality and openness to the strange other beyond national and communitarian boundaries. In the Eighteenth century, Immanuel Kant theorized for a world where the self and the stranger other live in 'perpetual peace' and 'hospitality'. Subsequently, contemporary philosophers such as Anthony Appiah, Martha Nussbaum, Seyla Benhabib and Ulrich Beck still celebrate cosmopolitanism as an antidote for the exclusionary dynamics of identity politics and methodological nationalism. Ulrich Beck (2006) states that "it [cosmopolitanism] has become the defining feature of a new era, the era of reflexive modernity, in which national borders and differences are dissolving and must be renegotiated in accordance with the logic of a 'politics of politics'."(11).

Nowadays, sociopolitical philosophers, literary critics and cultural theorists try to engage with the notion of cosmopolitan ethics from a rather postmodernist perspective. They suggest that new cosmopolitanism should shift focus onto the sociopolitical dimensions of cosmopolitanism and adopt a more sociopolitical approach to analyzing and understanding our globalized world. Accordingly, Tanya Agathocleous (2010) concludes that cosmopolitanism is only one of many terms used to describe similar or overlapping phenomena of interest to critics today: these include internationalism, globalization, and transnational literature, among others" (452). As a result, cosmopolitanism appeals to literary critics because it lends attention to the dynamics of the position of the intellectual vis-à-vis questions of plurality and universalism. In the same vein, Agathocleous adds, "Since the 1990s, a heated conversation about cosmopolitanism has swept across the humanities and social sciences, erupting in lay and academic venues. As a result, cosmopolitanism is increasingly becoming a popular lens through which to read literature"(452).

Contemporary British writers have also contributed to conceptualizing this global sweeping paradigm. These writers chose to interact in a global literary marketplace and publish from metropolitan cities such as London. Leila Aboulela is one of the renowned Muslim novelists who write in the English language to reach global readership and introduce their narratives to expanding markets in the former colonies of the empire.

The novels of the Anglophone Muslim Novelist Leila Aboulela, namely *The Translator* (2008), *The Minaret* (2005), and *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015), should be read against the background of literary theory, political philosophy and social sciences from a postmodernist perspective. It is only within such an interdisciplinary framework that we will manage to capture the fluid nature and complexity of the question of the foundering Cosmopolitan Ethics within the scope of ongoing religious identity reconfigurations of belonging and exclusion of Muslim women in metropolitan cities of the West in the aftermath of 9/11.

Leila Aboulela's narratives fit into the counter-cosmopolitan patterns as she strives hard to reconstruct bonds of coexistence between religious affiliations beyond territorial boundaries and race. She writes to sketch a critical paradigm which predicts the foundering of cosmopolitan ethics by nostalgically overstressing affiliation to restricted spaces of identity and territory. In so doing, Leila Aboulela's literary texts tend to celebrate the particular over the universal.

Leila Aboulela, in her three novels *The Translator* (2008), *The Minaret* (2005), *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015), decides to offer the protagonists space and opportunity to construct a transformative, transcultural and transnational spaces of belonging, but never allows them to acknowledge their predisposition for the cosmopolitan condition. She invents a third space for her protagonists through processes of cultural narration that open up spaces for coexistence and hospitality. It is fair now to hypothesize that Aboulela attempts to obfuscate dissimilarities and divisions susceptible to constructing harmonious cultural spaces, which are typical of the cosmopolitan literature.

And since "The issues facing arts and humanities do not exist in isolation, and are indeed intertwined with issues in all other areas"(Condee 19), it is even more justified to have an interdisciplinary take on retracing the cosmopolitan ethics and politics of religious identity in Leila Aboulela's Novels. Condee William also suggests that "the arts and humanities are in the midst of an interdisciplinary turn. This turn is a reaction to two problems: the transformation of universities in the twenty-first century and the challenges posed by postmodernism"(18). Again, my overall purpose in this thesis is to analyze the inverse relationship between claims of cosmopolitan ethics and Leila Aboulela's reconfigurations of religious identity in the metropolitan cities of the West despite the fallibilism and evasiveness of the concept of cosmopolitanism.

In the same vein, Condee writes that "Critical interdisciplinarity in the arts and humanities, therefore, is not a search for correct meaning or single truth; instead, it is a process of disruption, a search for ambiguity, and an act of provocation(...).critical interdisciplinarity seeks to intervene, disrupt, and deconstruct"(27). That is to say, I am trying to juxtapose assumptions advanced

Cosmopolitan Ethics and the Politics of Religious Identity in Leila Aboulela's Novels: an Interdisciplinary Perspective

by many Muslim theorists on cosmopolitan ethics beyond the nation with those proposed by sociopolitical philosophers and cultural theorists who agree to shun religiosity as an inherent condition for restricted cross-cultural conviviality.

Thus, working under the postmodernist tradition will provide my interdisciplinary take on the subject with critical interdisciplinary tools to transgress disciplinary norms, undermine hegemonic structures, disrupt the accepted organization of knowledge, and interrogate the purpose of these structures.[indeed] Critical Interdisciplinarity can foster a more participatory democracy and a more egalitarian society (Condee 26).

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