Arabic and World Literature:
Comparative and Multidisciplinary Perspectives

AWL-569, 2025
DOI: 10.31526/AWL.2025.569

Arab, African, or Both? Cultural Identity Crisis in Leila Aboulela's *Lyrics Alley*

Rania Salem

Faculty of Arts and Humanities, The British University, Egypt

rania.salem@bue.edu.eg

Abstract

According to H. J. Sharkey, Sudan's "unique Afro-Arab hybridity, cultural tolerance and capacity for internal coexistence" is a preferred reading among academics in this area (27). Indeed, this is true in a sense; however, some tension can be traced. Set in the fifties of the twentieth century, right before the end of the Anglo-Egyptian colonization of Sudan, Leila Aboulela's Lyrics Alley (2010) demonstrates a process of interpellation where the characters' Arab-African identities are put into test. *Lyrics Alley* presents special cases of cultural and ethnic identities who are struggling to know who they are according to cultural systems that raise conflicts about the characters' inward and outward lives. The paper explores how Aboulela succeeds in presenting different characters with different shades of flexibility and ideologies, and she manages to portray more than one character who, despite the difficulties and tragedies they face between Sudan and Egypt, can embrace both closely related cultures and work through them not in a fairy tale manner, but in a manner that reflects pain and beauty at the same time. Last but not least, the paper demonstrates how the characters' acknowledgment of their Arab-African identity gains them agency and offers new perceptions of the world and how the lack of embracing both identities (i.e., Arab and African) leads to further disintegration.

Keywords: Egypt, Sudan, Cultural Identity, Arab-African Identity, Leila Aboulela.

أزمة الهوية الثقافية في رواية "زقاق الأغاني" لليلى أبو العلا عربي، أفريقي، أم كلاهما؟

رانيا سالم

كلية الآداب والعلوم الإنسانية، الجامعة البريطانية، مصر

rania.salem@bue.edu.eg

ملخص

وفقًا لما يذكره هـ. ج. شارقي، فإن "الخصوصية الهجينة للأفرو-عربية، والتسامح الثقافي، والقدرة على التعايش الداخلي" في السودان تُعد قراءة مفضلة بين الأكاديميين في هذا المجال (27). وبالفعل، هذا صحيح إلى حد ما؛ ومع ذلك، يمكن تتبع بعض التوترات. تدور أحداث

رواية ليلى أبو العلا *زقاق الأغاني* (2010) في خمسينيات القرن العشرين، قبيل نهاية الاستعمار الثنائي الإنجليزي-المصري للسودان، وتعرض عملية استدعاء أيديولوجي يتم فيها وضع الهويات العربية-الأفريقية للشخصيات تحت الاختبار. تقدم رواية *زقاق الأغاني* حالات خاصة من الهويات الثقافية والعرقية التي تكافح من أجل معرفة من هم في ظل أنظمة ثقافية تثير صراعات بين الحياة الداخلية والخارجية للشخصيات. يستكشف هذا البحث كيف تنجح أبو العلا في تقديم شخصيات مختلفة تحمل درجات متنوعة من المرونة والأيديولوجيات، وكيف تتمكن من تصوير أكثر من شخصية، على الرغم من الصعوبات والمآسي التي يواجهونها بين السودان ومصر، تتبنى كلا الثقافتين المتقاربتين وتتعامل معهما ليس بطريقة خيالية، بل بأسلوب يعكس الألم والجمال في آنٍ واحد. وأخيرًا، يُبرز هذا البحث كيف أن تقبل الشخصيات بهويتها العربية-الأفريقية يمنحها فاعلية ويقدم رؤى جديدة للعالم، وكيف أن عدم تبني الهويتين معًا (أي العربية والأفريقية) يؤدي إلى مزيد من التفتت والتفكك.

كلمات مفتاحية: مصر، السودان، الهوية الثقافية، الهوية العربية الأفريقية، ليلى أبو العلا.

Introduction

Blackness and Sudan

The Arab and African identities are not conflicting identities; however, their intercultural intersection may result in an ideological struggle due to the ethnic and nationalistic concepts that are mainly essentialist and encourage negative exclusive notions to grow among the Arab-African societies. According to Sharkey, "in what is now Sudan, there occurred over the centuries a process of ta'rib, or Arabization, entailing the gradual spread of both Arab identity and the Arabic language" (22). Sharkey adds that Sudan's "unique Afro-Arab hybridity, cultural tolerance and capacity for internal coexistence" is a preferred reading among academics in this area (27). Indeed, this is true in a sense; however, some tension can be traced. Sharkey presents a brief historical account that demonstrates the kind of distinction between an Arab and a Sudanese during the Anglo-Egyptian colonization of Sudan that started by the end of the nineteenth century. Back then, there was no such thing as a self-described "Sudanese Arab." In those days, being Arab meant being Muslim, being free, and, preferably, having an Arab ancestry. Thus, Arabs were not slaves, and the word "Arab" ('arabi, pl. 'arab) meant "high status" because Muslims who claimed Arab clan and tribal affiliations (i.e., genealogical credentials) and who positioned themselves as the local heirs and bearers of Islam were considered Arab in the northern parts of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, where both Islam and the Arabic language were dominant (Sharkey 29). On the other hand, during the same time, "a deeply entrenched slave trade had bestowed servile connotations on the adjective Sudanese (*sudani* in Arabic), which derived from the Arabic term *sud*, meaning 'black people'" (Sharkey 29). Sharkey continues that by the 1940s, Sudanese nationalists began emphasizing the nation's cultural peculiarity by implying a theory of Sudanese Arab ethnic hybridity. This theory emerged at a critical time as independence was approaching, and educated Northern Sudanese, that is, Arabs, nationalists, and colonial state employees, needed to support their demands for future power. They also needed to demonstrate that they had a vision for the colonial territory as a whole and for leading Sudan (33). In the early 1950s, "as decolonization loomed, Northern Sudanese nationalists formulated plans for introducing Arabic into all Southern Sudanese schools," and in January 1956, Sudan gained independence, "declaring Arabic its sole official language and Islam its religion of state" (Sharkey 33, 34-5). Sharkey keeps following the Arabization process of Sudan till the late 1980s, demonstrating the failure of the Arabization policies (35-37). Therefore, the colonial legacy directly

influenced the formation of the Arab identity in Sudan in enforcing the ethnic colonial hierarchical construct, which disadvantaged blackness. Again, like in the two previous contexts, the issue of blackness as a cultural construction associated with inferiority and marginalization is intricately the outcome of many factors, one of which is colonization. Moreover, Sharkey questions how Arab ethnocentrism transformed into Arab racism. In an attempt to answer such a question, Sharkey uses Amir H. Idris's argument; according to him, racial discrimination in Sudan is rooted in the histories of slavery and the "unequal distribution of wealth and power between regions and social groups" (39). However, in the postcolonial period, Idris argues that racism has become more pronounced within the constant state of fear that surrounds "Arab pastoralists—who are buffeted by drought and desertification, awash in guns but lacking in well-watered grazing lands, and abetted by a regime that is determined to retain its power by crushing internal rebellions" (Sharkey 39). Thus, slavery and political hegemony are the main reasons that helped in shaping the Arab-African cultural tension which is hindering the Sudanese full inclusion in the Arab community" (Sharkey 40). Thus, it is clear that Lyrics Alley depicts the role of blackness in defining the dynamics of the Arab and the African intercultural relation.

Leila Aboulela

According to her official website, Leila Aboulela "was born in 1964 in Cairo, to an Egyptian mother and a Sudanese father. She moved to Sudan at the age of six weeks and lived in Khartoum continuously until 1987" (Biography). This Sudanese-born writer is "preoccupied with migration between North and South, cultural perceptions and stereotypes, and the possibilities of building bridges between former colonizer and colonized" (Hassan 298). *Lyrics Alley* has a biographical quality as Aboulela remarks, on her official website, that the novel "was inspired by the life of the poet Hassan Awad Aboulela. It is a work of fiction, filled with imaginary characters and situations and not intended as an accurate biography." Aboulela adds that writing this novel was inspired by her aunt Hajjah Rahma Aboulela (Hassan's sister) reciting to me Hassan's very first poem *Travel is the Cause*. On her official website, Aboulela states that she was particularly moved by the line "*In you Egypt are the causes of my injury. And in Sudan my burden and solace*"; for Aboulela, this line felt like a time-traveling message sent from one poet to another (Lyrics Alley – Inspiration). Aboulela also adds that the Egyptian-Sudanese identity crisis touched her personally as it embodied her own double heritage (Lyrics Alley – Inspiration). This biographical essence in the novel in addition to her Egyptian-Sudanese origins gives Aboulela the capacity to seek and present a nonessentialist view of the characters' cultural identity from a real ground experience; in other words, it is as if Aboulela "proposes cultural cosmopolitanism and religious plurality as fundamental strategies of cultural conflict resolution" (Abdel Wahab 27).

According to Abdel Wahab, as a "daughter of an Egyptian mother and Sudanese father and at the same time brought up at a Westernized environment of a private American school, Aboulela has always been tuned to cultural negotiations across heterogeneous geographies, ethnicities, and languages in Cairo, Khartoum"; this is why "Aboulela's hybrid locus is well represented by her typical merging of Eastern and Western locales, characters, styles, forms, tropes, modes, languages, norms, and cultures in her own texts" (225). In describing who she is, Aboulela states "I say, I am Sudanese, but my mother is Egyptian, I was

born in Cairo but that was only because my mother was visiting her parents. I lived in Khartoum, but every year we spent the summer months in Cairo" ("Moving Away from Accuracy" 198). Therefore, Aboulela succeeds in presenting different characters with different shades of flexibility and a myriad of negotiated ideologies. In *Lyrics Alley*, considering the struggles and traumas they endure between Sudan and Egypt, Aboulela succeeds in presenting more than one character who can appreciate both inextricably linked cultures in a way that portrays both hardships and grace at the same time. According to Rashid, "the particular intersection of Egyptian and Sudanese culture forms a pertinent sociopolitical backdrop, especially to Aboulela's most recent novel, *Lyrics Alley*" (615).

In his interview with Aboulela, Rashid asks her about her ability to adjust to different cultures and settings. Aboulela replies explaining the dilemma she used to face while growing up with parents of different nationalities saying that the blending of cultures charms her (Rashid 618). Despite the fact that Egypt and Sudan are arguably neighbors and have many things in common, this mixed heritage as a child caused Aboulela some conflicts: Should she talk with a Sudanese or Egyptian accent? Should she dress like her Egyptian mother or like her Sudanese cousins and aunts? Aboulela adds that she was sensitive to the intercultural challenges when she got to Britain since she had experienced these perplexities herself (Rashid 618). Clearly, Aboulela's geographical dislocation was bewildering and puzzling; however, Aboulela managed to benefit from and cherish this dislocation through accepting and embracing the seemingly puzzling differences between her two cultures: the Egyptian and the Sudanese. This is reflected in her novel *Lyrics Alley* through more than one character; in other words, Aboulela's characters succeed in benefiting from their juggling/journeys between the two countries.

In her own commentary on her writings, Aboulela questions herself: "I have second thoughts about it later. Was it really like that, in that order? Was I being honest, accurate, ungrateful? The truth in an autobiography remains fluid, shaped by the state of mind at the moment of narrative" ("Moving Away from Accuracy" 206). Aboulela's words reveal her own awareness of the subjectivity of her position and how her cultural identity is an "unstable point of identification or suture, which is made within the discourses of history and culture: not an essence, but a positioning" (Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" 226). Aboulela acknowledges that her perception of her past is colored with the shades of her ever-evolving and changing position. Such perception affects her delineation of characters who, though challenged by their surroundings, are constantly involved in a process of integration in their contexts.

Aboulela's *Lyrics Alley* anatomizes "the double process of deconstructing canonical myths of self and reinscribing potential solidarity with the other" who eventually is revealed to share the same existential quest (Abdel Wahab 222). *Lyrics Alley* is also an interesting read because the motif of migration in it "is conducted across discrepant geographies and subcultures that are affiliated to the same culture, namely, Arab Sudanese culture in postcolonial times" (Abdel Wahab 229). *Lyrics Alley* is set in the fifties of the twentieth century right before the end of the Anglo-Egyptian colonization of Sudan. The Abuzeid family is headed by the successful businessman Mahmoud Abuzeid in the recently decolonized Sudan. Mahmoud is married to two women: the Egyptian "metropolitan" Nabilah and the Sudanese "traditionalist" Waheeba; the two wives living in the same sphere represent the concurrent conflict, jealousy, and intertwining of the

two cultures (Rashid 615). In other words, the Abuzeids are thus depicted as torn between two seemingly conflicting preferences and ways of life: the European lifestyle embodied by Nabilah, Mahmoud's youthful Egyptian spouse, and the provincial one exemplified by Hajjah Waheeba, Mahmoud's Sudanese wife (Abdel Wahab 225). Rashid adds that it is only the lyrics and poetry of Mahmoud's quadriplegic son—Nur— that gives hope to surpass and melt both the physical and political barriers that are created in the Abuzeid's house; thus, "literary performance creates a new space which crucially avoids politics in favour of a lyrical focus on love and loss" (615). Through five main characters—three Sudanese and two Egyptian—Aboulela succeeds in revealing how both the Egyptian and the Sudanese identities are different yet similar.

The Cosmopolitan: Mahmoud Bey Abuzeid

Aboulela's characters illustrate the process of identity development and integration, as her "hybrid locus" is effectively exemplified by her characteristic amalgamation of Eastern and Western settings, characters, styles, forms, tropes, modes, languages, conventions, and cultures throughout her works (Abdel Wahab 225). The first character that reflects this is Mahmoud Abuzeid, who is a "cultural cosmopolitan" (Abdel Wahab 229). Aboulela depicts Mahmoud as a successful metropolitan businessman who adheres to his Sudanese traditions, heritage, and family the same way he is proud of his Egyptian origins; Mahmoud has strong commercial bonds with national and international financiers and merchants and invests in building high Egyptianized buildings in Khartoum (Abdel Wahab 229). Mahmoud's son, Nur, tells his Egyptian teacher, Badr, that on building the saraya, Mahmoud wants Egyptian taste and expertise—itself borrowed from Europe—to be firmly placed in Sudan. Do you know how this saraya came to be built? Father was driving his motor car along a boulevard in Heliopolis and stopped to marvel at a Pasha's mansion. He then contacted the architect and said, 'Design one like it for me in Umdurman.' The materials, too, from the marble tiles to the garden lamps, were shipped from Italy via Egypt. (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 21-22).

In short, Mahmoud is a "cosmopolitan citizen and a self-made businessman… who seeks to rewrite his religious tradition in accordance with the value system of globalized culture" (Abdel Wahab 229). Mahmoud is influenced by the colonial legacy and sees Egypt as an extension of this colonial legacy. He, thus, believes that imitating the West can compensate for his blackness and make it overlooked.

Mahmoud's *saraya* in Sudan represents "a Janus-like land reconciling the opposite qualities of the modern and the traditional" through his two wives, the Sudanese Hajjah Waheeba and the Egyptian Nabilah (Abdel Wahab 231). Abdel Wahab's usage of the word "reconciling" is very accurate as the two sides of the *saraya* (Hajjah Waheeba's side and Nabilah's side) are not harmonious by default; it was a process of consecutive struggles and truces that led to a kind of acceptance and reconciliation—offered by Mahmoud's son, Nur. As Abdel Wahab states, "the gap between the Waheeba's hoash that is modeled after the open, spacious Sudan and Nabilah's wing in the saraya that is designed as a modern Egyptian home stands for the rift between the traditional communitarianism of Sudanese tribal society on the one hand and modern Western liberalism that highly esteems individual freedom and privacy on the other" (232). Furthermore, Aboulela's works present Muslim women with an in-depth investigation of how these women maintain

respect for their traditions while seeking opportunities for autonomy; consequently, Aboulela's writings are valuable contributions as they reveal the true essence of customs that are frequently perceived as antagonistic (Lipenga 96). *Lyrics Alley* investigates the humanistic aspects of the intercultural-clash narrative and offers her characters the chance to perform as integrative individuals, and Mahmoud is one of such characters whom the readers witness his journey of accepting who he really is.

The Struggling: Nabilah

The Cairene Nabilah got married to Mahmoud Bey, who is not only the head of the Abuzeid family but also the man who brings the Sudanese and the Egyptian cultures in his home. With her mother's consent, Nabilah gets married to Mahmoud who "was light-skinned enough to pass for an Egyptian, his clothes were as modern and as elegant as any other [Egyptian] Bey" and not "too Sudanese for her" like his brother Idris, who she did not "particularly like" (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 29, 33). Her mother, Qadriyyah, found Mahmoud to be a perfect suitor for Nabilah since he was wealthy and well known and had been received by the king (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 182). The readers thus know that Nabilah "is defiant because these are circumstances, she did not choose for herself. She was only a young girl when her mother—seemingly anxious to rid herself of her overly attached daughter so that her own new marriage could receive her full attention—married her to the older Mahmoud Bey" (Rahman 230). After traveling with her husband to settle in Sudan, Nabilah "knew that she should be more flexible, that she should adjust, but she was not easy-going enough, and too conscious of her status" as an Egyptian Cairene young woman who grew up in a "civilized" atmosphere. Nabilah had her own fears, "sometimes she was able to hold her breath and accept, but on most days, she struggled" as, for her, Sudan was "like the bottom of the sea, an exotic wilderness, soporific and away from the momentum of history. It was amazing but constricting, threatening to suck her in, to hold her down and drown her" (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 24). In Sudan, among Mahmoud's family, Nabilah "must bear this dull, metallic feeling of—not exactly defeat, but not exactly success, either" (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 37). Hence, this geographical displacement puts Nabilah's identity to the test. Thus, Nabila survives and reconciles the fragmentation she encounters.

As a coping mechanism in Umdurman, Nabilah "surrounded herself with the sights, accents and cooking smells of Egypt, closing the door on the heat, dust and sunlight of her husband's untamed land" (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 25). Nabilah "felt far away from Cairo, and somewhat excluded. Was it her fate to be always in the periphery?" (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 37). She longed for Egypt more than she hated Sudan; "it still did not feel right that they were in Sudan. This had not been the original arrangement when they first got married. The original arrangement was that she would live in the flat Mahmoud had set up for her in Cairo, and that he would spend lengthy visits with her… Nabilah would be his Egyptian wife in Cairo and Hajjah Waheeba his Sudanese wife in Umdurman. It had made perfect sense" (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 27). Nabilah wanted her kids to look Egyptian, like her; however, while she was grateful that Ferial "did not have coarse hair," she did not disdain that Farouk's "skin was darker than his mother's [Nabilah's] and sister's, his hair more curly, his features more African" (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 26-28).

Although Nabilah and Hajjah Waheeba represented the modern and the traditional dichotomy, respectively, both women had the expected rivalry attitude toward each other. Interestingly, Aboulela did not portray Nabilah as a superior or, in other words, an authoritative figure to any of the Sudanese family members of Mahmoud's family. Nabilah hoped to "put an end to all of this: an end to being inferior because she was the second wife and of being superior because she was Egyptian" (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 84). Aboulela shows how Nabilah was broken as a kid since the ten-year-old Nabilah "must tiptoe around the apartment, not use the bathroom for too long, not weep too loud, because, as her mother put it to her bluntly, she was a guest" (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 34). Qaadriyyah let Nabilah grow up to become "small, insignificant and inoffensive" without a home of her own to belong to and this did not change after she got married to Mahmoud Bey; although she had her own Europeanized wing in the saraya, Hajjah Waheeba's authority over her hoash had the upper hand (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 34).

In fact, Hajjah Waheeba is the one who exercises power over and oppresses Nabilah. A glaring example is Ferial's circumcision as per Waheeba's commands and against Nabila's consent and Mahmoud's rules as he "had forbidden circumcision in his household ever since the procedure was declared illegal by the Anglo-Egyptian government" (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 186). Hunter claims that the rivalry between Nur's father, Mahmoud Bey, and his two wives depicts Sudan's "cultural backwardness." According to Hunter, the first Sudanese wife, Waheeba, gets frustrated over her husband's preference for his younger, well-educated Cairene bride; Nabilah. Waheeba makes Nabilah's daughter undergo a procedure of genital mutilation as vengeance when Mahmoud and the girl's mother are away from home; consequently, Aboulela criticizes polygyny and the mutilation of females, attributing them to Sudanese cultural practices (95). Hunter's argument is not precise as it is clear from Aboulela's text that although Waheeba did not like Nabilah, her main intention in that particular incident was to assert the Sudanese cultural norms and heritage—that Waheeba takes huge pride in—since her own granddaughter, Zainab, was circumcised with Ferial in a celebration where "the women of the neighbourhood were invited [and they] sang wedding songs, and the older girls danced, miming the bridal pigeon dance" (*Lyrics Alley* 186). Waheeba may have wanted to tease her rival Nabilah, but she never had the intention of avenging Nabilah or the little girl who, by such an act, became Sudanese like Zainab and the Abuzeid girls. On Waheeba's behalf, the girls' circumcision is an act of assertion: identity assertion.

The day Nabilah gets back home to find Ferial circumcised with her nephew Zainab, she knows that Waheeba "herself had held the girls down one by one, gripping their knees apart"; Nabilah knew that after this irreversible deed, Ferial "was someone else, one of them [and] she could never ever be like her mother again" (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 186). Nabilah started to visualize Ferial's future as an Egyptian woman with deep sorrow:

When Nabilah had first heard these stories, they had sounded abstract and distant, folklorist tales of backward women. Now her own flesh and blood was incriminated. In the future, when Ferial got married, she would suffer pain and alienation from pleasure. A progressive, liberal man might not even want to marry her in the first place. He would have to be Sudanese, one of *them*, and Nabilah, casting her vision to the future, had always wished that her children would marry Egyptians. Even more consequences: every

time Ferial had a baby, it would be necessary to slit the circumcision skin fold during labour and stitch it up again afterwards. Nabilah could visualise the future scene in a modern Cairo hospital, the obstetrician shaking his head, disgusted to come across such barbarity, the kind of barbarity only found among peasants and the uneducated. (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 188-9).

Nabila describes this act as "Waheeba had struck her a terrible blow as she took away her daughter's Egyptian-ness" (Aboulela, Lyrics Alley 189). This incident seems to be the highlight of the cultural conflict between Egypt and Sudan, Nabilah and Waheeba, respectively. Both women want to culturally claim Ferial by attempting to make her either an Egyptian girl or a Sudanese one, not a hybrid.

As a consequence of Ferial's genital mutilation against Nabila's prior knowledge and approval, Waheeba's divorce is the only apology that Nabila would take. However, Mahmoud Bey claims that he cannot do such a thing. He explains to the infuriated Nabilah that he is furious, but "what good will divorcing her achieve? She's Nur's mother; he needs her now more than ever [because of Nur's disability after the accident]. I can't kick her out of the saraya" (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 207). Nabilah replies that Mahmoud should choose either her or Waheeba, and when he does not accept being cornered or threatened, she takes the children and goes back to Egypt to her mother's place. Being in the busy Cairo, "Nabilah could so easily forget about Sudan," or that is how she thought (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 279). Returning to Cairo is eye opening to Nabila; Nabilah believed that returning to her homeland is the key to her salvation. In other words, her return helped her to appreciate both places, that is, here and there.

In Cairo, Nabilah rediscovers her real feelings toward Mahmoud and Sudan, reconciles and reconnects with her mother, and realizes the hybridity of her children, as if Cairo is offering her a fresh eye to reevaluate her surroundings. During her first days in Cairo, Nabilah rejoices her hometown; however, "the only thing that marred her life was the children. Farouk and Ferial were like lumps of food stuck in her throat. They were refusing to adjust to the move or to embrace their new life" (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 279). Farouk looked more like his father Mahmoud, more African than herself.

He looked wrong, too, walking next to her, his skin too dark and his hair kinky. The man at the haberdashery shop she frequented to buy buttons and tracing paper made comments when he saw them together.

'I don't understand how the mother can be so pretty and the son something else!' he would say, or, with an exaggerated expression of astonishment, 'Can all this beauty have such a dark son?' He was getting bolder with time. 'Why did they marry you off to a foreigner, Madame? What's wrong with your fellow countrymen?' (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 280).

Taking such comments as flattering compliments, Nabilah "considered them part of the amusement and banter of Cairo Street life. She would answer back, too, saying, '[i]t's my fate and my portion' or '[m]y daughter is pretty, you can't fault *her*. Thank God, she has smooth hair'" (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 280). Nabilah did not perceive these comments as racist, but she was still concerned about Ferial and Farouk; the kids "were like centaurs, neither fully Egyptian nor fully Sudanese, awkward, clumsy, serious and destined to never fit in" (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 280). Here, blackness and discrimination within the Arab-African

culture are exposed. Nabila's concern that her children may not fit in either culture made her reconsider her decisions. In this eye-opening moment, Nabilah realizes that she and her kids must embrace and accept the intercultural quality of the kids' identities in order to be able to fully belong to both cultures.

For Nabilah, everything in Cairo was better than its counterpart in Khartoum, and the kids must believe so and appreciate living in Cairo. Burdened by all these thoughts, Nabilah was exasperated by the kids and "the thought of sending them to live with their father did seem appealing. But she would immediately chide herself. It would be morally wrong to give them up to such chaos. Who would supervise their upbringing in Umdurman? The servants? Hajjah Waheeba? And what calibre of adults would that produce (look at Nassir)?" (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 281). After spending a few months in Cairo and thinking that she had gotten over Khartoum, Nabilah receives two guests who help her reevaluate her marriage to Mahmoud; these guests are Soraya—Mahmoud's niece—and Ustaz Badr—the Egyptian Arabic teacher for the Abuzeids. Soraya's visit is Nabilah's wake-up call. On her honeymoon, and in her fancy clothes and French perfume, Soraya visits Nabilah in Cairo and expresses how much she missed Nabilah during the wedding preparations and how she looked up to Nabilah "I've always wanted to dress in white like you. I used to enjoy looking at all the photographs of your wedding. Remember when I used to come over to the saraya to pore over the albums"; at this moment, Nabilah recalled how Soraya "would barge in unannounced, then would wander around Nabilah's rooms, fingering the curtains, touching the ornaments, flicking through books and albums" (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 285). Then, Nabilah realizes that "inside the girl's [Soraya's] heart was affection and admiration" toward Nabilah; Soraya looked up to Nabilah's style and manners and, back then in Umdurman, Nabilah did not recognize this and misinterpreted it. In her bed this night, Nabilah thinks about Soraya's visit:

'*I wish you had been in Umdurman to help me plan my wedding*.' So straightforward a sentiment. To help set up the first Egyptian-style wedding in Umdurman, a wedding like her own. This was touching. The girl had looked up to her, even though Nabilah hadn't noticed. And why hadn't she noticed? Because of her own prejudices, and because of the girl's unpolished manners, the fact that she did not address Nabilah formally and wore a tobe and chewed gum and laughed at the children. These were the opaque barriers. Life in Sudan would have had a meaning if Nabilah had been able to make a difference, if she had thrived as a role model, as a champion of progress, as a good influence. She could have taken a younger person's hand and guided them. But she hadn't . . . This was the loss that brought tears to her eyes, the loss that would define her children's lives. She had not been able to rise and fill that leadership position. She had allowed Waheeba, the dust, the heat, the insects, the landscape and customs to defeat her. She had not fought back. (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 286-7).

Nabilah was exhausted from the double position that was enforced upon her, that is, a superior Egyptian but an inferior second wife; thus, she could not see other possibilities or roles. She was caught up in a limbo state of passive nostalgia and insignificant role. Nabilah could not think of any possible option to add real value to her own life in Umdurman. This state of passive nostalgia puts Nabilah's identity crisis to the test; however, Nabila is not entrapped for long in this passive nostalgia and decides to be an integrated individual

in the life of her family: her mother in Cairo, her husband, Mahmoud, in Umdurman, and her children between Cairo and Umdurman.

The second visitor, Ustaz Badr, was treated with full honors, and he was "circling delicately around the subject and repeating himself" (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 288). Soraya's visit softened Nabilah's heart and opened her ears toward Mahmoud and Umdurman, and Ustaz Badr, unknowingly, took it from there. He was not scolding her or belittling her. He was too respectful for that. And it was as if he understood and took for granted her need for Cairo, her love for home. Umdurman was not up to her standards, but Mahmoud was excellent. Umdurman was to be endured, and Mahmoud was to be celebrated. The burden and the prize, the trial and the reward. (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 288).

Ustaz Badr, a fellow Cairene, related to Nabilah's nostalgia for Cairo and frustration with Umdurman. Although he was very rational and logical, "it was not the arguments he presented, but the memories he evoked, the confidence he inspired, and the goodness he underlined. Magnanimous and fair… She should have been his support, she should have understood and appreciated better" (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 289).

With all these struggles, Nabilah's character develops to be autonomous; she realizes that she has the power to give, to choose, to decide, and to act upon her own will. She understands that she can be more than the young, classy Egyptian wife of Mahmoud Abuzeid; she is a mother, a role model, and a decision maker. Thus, Nabilah becomes a perfect example of Hall's concept about identity making as he states that "identities are never completed, never finished, that they are always, as subjectivity itself is, in process" (Hall, *Essential Essays: Volume 2*. 69). By the end of the novel, Nabilah is more mature and compassionate; she transforms from a prisoner of Umdurman's crudeness and Cairo's festivity to a mature woman who can embrace and appreciate both crudeness and beauty. Her capacity to grow and appreciate is unleashed to make her always refashioning herself and her relationship to others without losing the true essence of who she is.

The Keeper of Traditions: Hajjah Waheeba

Hajjah Waheeba, the Sudanese first wife of Mahmoud Abuzeid, is "more African in features than her husband, and on each side of her cheeks ran three tribal scars, like cracks on a dry riverbed, which made her face look broader and more open"; Waheeba has a round body as well as "wide eyes and excellent teeth, her colourful to be and the bangles of gold that glittered from her wrist to her elbow, she was attractive in spite of her age" (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 16-17). Waheeba is the queen and the ruler of the hoash in the Abuzeid house; the hoash "is filled with traditional beds, *angharaibs* made of rope, and large round trays of food" (Abdel Wahab 232).

Unlike Nabilah, Hajjah Waheeba was neither educated nor accepting the modern norms or standards; she was a traditionalist with the full sense of the word; she cherished and respected her husband, loved her sons, and is a "staunch believer in Sudanese traditions and customs, including female circumcision" (qtd. in Fasselt, *Routledge Handbook of African Literature* 113). Moreover, Hajjah Waheeba "negotiates her identity within the pressurising environment of the Abuzeid home without adapting to what her husband and Nabilah conceive of as a 'modern lifestyle'" (Fasselt, *Routledge Handbook of African Literature* 113).

In other words, Waheeba secures her identity through preserving the Sudanese traditions that she grew up believing in, even if this means going against the head of the family, her husband. According to Abdel Wahab.

Aboulela portrays Nabilah's negative translation of the Sudan and the hoash in contrast to the other Sudanese characters' positive retranslations. In contrast to Nabilah who first fails to reconsider the Sudan as her home and translates such failure as drowning, Nur translates the hoash and its smells, birds, and visitors as a motherly figure wiping his tears away after being injured in a swimming accident in Alexandria and coming back home from London (232-233).

Mahmoud's feelings toward Waheeba were different than those to Nabilah. After Nur's accident—which will be discussed in further details later—Mahmoud felt "a faint pity for his wife [Waheeba]"; for him, she was a "stupid woman, ignorant of concepts of distance and time" (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 45).

Waheeba is a distant relative to Mahmoud who was forced upon him by his father because she is "the only daughter of an established Umdurman merchant who had become wealthy by trading in Gum Arabic"; moreover, Waheeba was older than Mahmoud by few years—in their youth, this age difference "seemed like a decade" (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 46). Aboulela presents how Waheeba came into the Abuzeid family with money and business connections. At twenty-one, she was considered a spinster and her family had no hesitation in marrying her off and financing a lavish wedding. Mahmoud, a youth of eighteen, his mind taken up with a fascination for commerce, had hated Waheeba at first sight; hated her because of her dullness and lack of beauty and, most of all, because she was forced on him. Their wedding night was a disaster, a humiliation he had buried deep and did not talk to his friends about. It was almost a miracle that Nassir and Nur were conceived, but their arrival, and the force Inof the years, eroded his distaste for her. (*Lyrics Alley* 46).

In *Lyrics Alley*, Waheeba does not have the voice that most of the main characters have—whether these characters are Egyptian or Sudanese. Bakhtin asserts that the "consciousnesses of other people cannot be perceived, analyzed, defined as objects or as things—one can only relate to them dialogically. To think about them means to talk with them, otherwise they immediately turn to us their objectivized side: they fall silent, close up, and congeal into finished, objectivized images"; in Waheeba's case, her silence asserts her objectivized side to the members of her family (*Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics* 68). According to Fasselt, "one may hold it against the author that Waheeba's perspective is silenced throughout the narrative. Yet Aboulela at the same time uses Waheeba to question the value-laden, hierarchic organisation of mobilities that tend to structure the cosmopolitan mobilities paradigm" (114). In other words, in the realm of *Lyrics Alley*, Waheeba's presence urges the reader to reevaluate the social hierarchy in Sudan un the presence of another nationality which is represented by Nabilah. Unlike Nabilah, Waheeba did not leave Sudan except for her pilgrimage; again, Waheeba's confinement adds to her appreciation of her traditions. It can be assumed that Waheeba's silence serves another layer in Aboulela's text, that is, the traditional position of the Sudanese women in this pivotal time in the fifties of the twentieth century.

Being the traditionalist did not prevent Waheeba from taking a course-changing role in the Abuzeid family; this is evident in two main incidents: Ferial's genital circumcision and setting her hoash up for her son Nur after his accident. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Hajjah Waheeba had Ferial go under such an operation with her granddaughter Zainab against the girl's parents' will and jeopardizing her fragile connection with her husband for the sake of preserving traditions. Indirectly, and through such a hideous act, Waheeba is the one who pushed Nabilah to leave Sudan and, consequently, the latter reconsiders her perspective about her marriage which transforms "from Egypt's negation of Africanness, as expressed in Nabilah's initial views, toward a reconciling hybridity that embraces the traditional and the modern" (Fasselt 113).

Thus, Waheeba's role and influence, as calm as it may appear, reaches almost each character and individual in the Abuzeid family; her hoash becomes Nur's rebirth place after his fatal accident (which will be discussed later in this paper), she is an indirect trigger that pushes Nabilah to reconsider her life in Sudan, and she supports Mahmoud in his sickness. It can be suggested that we, as readers, do not know that much about Waheeba's inner thoughts and feelings, but her apparent silent existence is a catalyst in the main characters' lives.

The Harmonizer: Nur

Nur Mahmoud Abuzeid is a character inspired by the life of the poet Hassan Awad Aboulela—Aboulela's father's cousin. Aboulela dedicates a whole section to Hassan Aboulela, and she explains how her muse was triggered by her aunt Hajjah Rahma Aboulela (Hassan's sister) reciting to her Hassan's very first poem: *Travel is the Cause.* According to Aboulela's official website, her father looked up to his cousin Hassan Awad, who was six years older than him. Aboulela's father was determined to follow Hassan's example, where he would also leave Umdurman, like Hassan, to go to Victoria College, the British boarding school in Alexandria that was regarded as the Eton of the Middle East at the time. In the future, they both wanted to attend a British university, return, and work side by side in the family firm. According to all reports, Hassan was a standout student in Victoria College who made a name for himself among both academics and athletics. Hassan had a bright future awaiting him; that is, the end of British colonial rule was imminent and the family business was thriving and ready for the younger, more educated generation to modernize and continue it into a new, independent Sudan. However, a beach trip with his classmates on Hassan's last day at Victoria College altered the trajectory of his life (Lyrics Alley – Inspiration). This life-changing accident left Hassan—or Nur—quadriplegic; "No Cambridge University after all, no joining the family business, no marriage" (Lyrics Alley – Inspiration). Aboulela uses Nur's disability to bridge the gap between the two cultures—the Egyptian and the Sudanese—as "'[w]ithin literary narratives, disability serves as an interruptive force that confronts cultural truisms'" (qtd. in Lipenga 94). To reiterate, as a character, Nur offers two opposite positions (i.e., from being a promising abled young man to a physically disabled one) which creates a space of understanding and compromise not only for him but also for all the Abuzieds—whether Sudanese or Egyptian.

The very first pages of the novel describe Nur through the eyes of his father Mahmoud as "brilliant in his studies, outstanding in sports, especially football. An all-rounder, the English headmaster said" (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 42). Nur is bad at nothing; consequently, all his family's aspirations about his promising future were understandable. While Soraya—the love of Nur's life—and Cambridge were waiting for him, Nur has the accident in Alexandria and gets back to Umdurman crippled. Within the process of accepting his new situation, Nur experiences denial, grief, broken pride, and letting go of his prearranged future. It is this space that makes him more unique and makes the people around him more open to his different abilities, that is, poetry. When he is back to Sudan after the accident, he develops what he always suppressed; the "Sudanese beauty makes Nur heave inside, makes him want to gather the place and the mood. It must be a skill, like fishing, to cast your net into a river of dreams catch a splendid array of words" (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 230).

Nur's disability reflects "how marginal spaces can potentially become spaces of being and becoming, spaces that enable the harnessing of creative energy by persons occupying them" (Lipenga 94). The marginal space in Nur's case is represented in the Waheeba's hoash, where mourning the loss of his ability and his beloved Soraya opens the window of poetry, where he becomes one of the well-known poets and songwriters in Sudan. Nur was denied writing poetry before the accident since he had an already planned future that involved nothing but business. Moreover, to the Abuzeid family, Nur writing poetry—before the accident—was a disgrace; however, after the accident, the novel takes another turn and becomes "a touching example of how society is governed by such factors, and attempts to illustrate ways in which the discourse may be challenged, or at least modified, in the light of changing experiences" (Lipenga 97). The role reversal represented by Nur reflects another form of performativity, which Butler defines as "not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration" (xv), where the Abuzieds are taken off balance and eventually accept the new role that he is occupying.

Therefore, Nur's poetry "displays the complexity that results from the two worlds that his family inhabits–Egypt and Sudan" since "the very language of Nur's poetry mediates between and attempts to harmonize the spaces represented by the two women. The language that he chooses for the poem links back to the fusing of the diverse forces that constantly surround him" (Lipenga 101). By embodying the two opposites of the ultimate potential and disability, Nur symbolizes hope that is restored and harmony that can be attained.

The Reconciler: Ustaz Badr

The second main Egyptian character in the novel is Ustaz Badr, the Arabic language and religion teacher who works in Sudan as a school teacher and as a private tutor to Mahmoud Abuzeid's children. Ustaz Badr is a very unique character in Aboulela's novel since he "retranslates Sudan in a more Sufistic manner" to reflect other dimensions of the Egyptian-Sudanese integration as "he is neither rich nor well-connected. An Egyptian teacher of Arabic and private tutor to the Abuzeid children, he is learned, wise and pious" (Abdel Wahab 226; Rahman 231). The first appearance for Badr in the novel suggests his social and class level in

Sudan especially in relation to the Abuzeids; when he is in Mahmoud's office, he did not even have the chance to remind Mahmoud of himself as the children's private tutor and "it seemed to Badr that he was pushed aside. Metaphorically yes, he was discarder but physically too, he was pushed aside" for the sake of the English man who popped in Mahmoud's busy office (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 55). As a result, Badr "shrunk himself, backed out, and slipped out of the door, away from the enthusiasm between men who mattered and the exchange of these clipped, sparkling English words" (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 56). Like Nabila, the main Egyptian character in the novel, Badr is not superior to the novel's main Sudanese family; in other words, both Badr and Nabilah are aware of their positioning; Aboulela makes it clear that Badr and Nabila are not represented in line with the Anglo-Egyptian colonialism—both characters are neither inferior nor superior; they are human beings.

Badr is passionate about his job, his wife Hanniyah, his children, and his father. A believer and a spiritual individual as he is, Badr always attempts to wait for God's bigger plan to reveal itself; after disappointedly leaving Mahmoud's office "having not mentioned the new building [which is owned by Mahmoud], let alone his request to rent an apartment," Badr reassures himself that it is God's will that no one can change since first he was a pious believer and second is that "wallowing in self-pity and humiliation was a luxury he could not afford" (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 56). In other words, Badr always "attempts to employ the Islamic vision of fate to cope with his hard life conditions: expatriation, his father's aging illness, and the unfulfilled social demands of his family" (Abdel Wahab 227).

Through Badr and his wife Hanniyah, Aboulela demonstrates the everyday sameness between Egypt and Sudan and how the process of finding the elements of belonging is not as difficult as it is for Nabilah. Although Badr felt out of place in Mahmoud's busy cosmopolitan office, "there was a space for him in the streets of Khartoum," which again refers to his acceptance of the Egyptian-Sudanese cultural integration; in fact, Badr experienced "more benign spirits" in Sudan rather than "the ghouls and djinns that inhabited the darkness of alleyways and the most deserted of fields" in his Egyptian village (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 58). Badr also "liked praying in Sudan" as there "was something spacious and welcoming about these prayers in the open air" (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 58). Praying in Sudan offered Badr "a dip in an alternative state, where he was weightless and free, and his concerns, valid… slackened and moved away" (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 59). For Badr, something was different with Sudan as he concluded that "the barriers between the human and the spirit worlds were thin, or that there were cracks and transparencies through which that other, unknown, world could, at times, be sensed" (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 60). Unlike Nabilah, Badr had the will and the tendency to find the aspects of commonness and sublimity within the Sudanese setting.

A very integral aspect to Badr's character is his wife Hanniyah who "was his inner self, his unrestrained half" (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 68). Hanniyah is another window for Aboulela to demonstrate how two cultures are interrelated. For example, Hanniyah is the one who is pushing Badr to rent a better apartment for them, but when he returns home after failing to voice out his request to Mahmoud, she tells Badr about her encounter with her Sudanese neighbor Salha, who brought Hanniyah "feseakh" (salted fish). Hanniyah tells Badr that Salha told her "You have to taste our Sudanese dish and I said to her we have this same dish of salted fish but we make it on Eid"; Haneya comments that she tasted it and "it was different—but tasty"—

same dish with a different agreeable taste is a very subtle addition by Aboulela (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 64). Moreover, Hanniyah, who is pregnant, adds that she does not want to move before she delivers her baby because Salha "was kind and friendly"; she continues, "I thought how can I move away from her and deliver all by myself? She [Salha] promised to help me. Who knows what kind of neighbours we will have if we move? So, I want to stay here in this house until after I give birth" (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 64). Furthermore, the month of Ramadan brought even more similarities together. Hanniyah was "involved in an exchange of dishes and drinks with their Sudanese neighbours, noting their love of sweet drinks and how they drank more than they ate when it was time to break the fast" (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 124). Indeed, Badr is a character in the novel in which "Aboulela's evocative prose is most pleasing in her depiction of Badr. His is a voice that falls outside the upper echelons of Sudanese, Egyptian and British society"; through Badr, Aboulela describes the mystifying beauty of Sudan (Rahman 231). Accordingly, Badr emphasizes the novel's polyphonic quality which, according to Bakhtin, is "the miracle of our 'dialogical' lives together" (*Problems of Dostoyvesky's Poetics* 22). Therefore, Aboulela succeeds in bringing together different voices that act harmoniously together.

Interestingly, as much as he loved the Sudanese atmosphere, Badr was aware that living in Egypt would have been easier. For instance, when Badr felt burdened by his father, who suffers from dementia, he thought, "perhaps if they were home in Kafr-el-Dawar it would have been easier. Village life would have been more accommodating, and his father would have been surrounded by faces and places he had known all his life" (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 131). Again, Badr appreciates and loves both places. Badr's father's illness burdened him as "there had been many humiliations in his life; his father's condition would not be the first or the last" (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 132). Thus, such performative acts in Egypt and Sudan give Badr a reconciliatory ability that helps him in accepting the seemingly different cultures.

Aboulela did not portray Badr as an angel; he had his pitfalls that he consistently fought. Although Badr is pious, he has his own questions about his sufferings. For Badr, it "felt like a journey with its own hardships and elation; its anxieties and weakness, its greed for God's mercy, its yearning for blessings, its departure points and graceful arrival" (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 133). After being falsely accused of stealing Waheeba's jewelry—which was stolen by his cousin Shukry—Badr's mind gets all stirred up and cannot understand why God made him go through this injustice, that is, being "unfairly prisoned" (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 214). Moreover, when Nur asks Badr "why bad things happen to good people? On that day, Badr made an effort to bolster the boy's morale and fortitude" (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 213). For Badr, bad things happen "for pedagogical reasons, so that we can experience the power of Allah, catch a glimpse of Hell and fear it, so that we can practice seeking refuge in Him and, when relief comes give thanks for His mercy"; in other words, "in Badr the concept of Muslim logic and spiritualized struggle is embodied" (Aboulela, *Lyrics Alley* 217; Rahman 231). Clearly, Badr's imprisonment does not color him with resentment or bitterness. Indeed, one may claim that Badr's capacity for growth is further accentuated in his imprisonment; it allows him to gain more knowledge about how things work and prepares him for more acceptance of change and struggles. Moreover, Badr played an important role in getting Nabilah back to Mahmoud when he visits her in Cairo. In Nabilah's Cairo home, Badr was celebrated by Ferial and Farouk

and respected by Nabilah. In his attempt to reconcile Nabilah with Mahmoud. Badr succeeded in evoking the good memories about Umdurman and Mahmoud so that Nabilah, for the first time in her Cairo stay, could really reconsider getting back to Umdurman. Therefore, it can be suggested that Badr and Nabilah are "portrayed as voluntary cultural translators/migrants attempting to reconcile the modern and the authentic, the secular and the sacred, and the foreign and the native" (Abdel Wahab 230).

Thus, Badr was sincere about reconciling Mahmoud and Nabilah, about helping and supporting Nur, and about the welfare of his family. It can be suggested that Badr is the most open character to intercultural diversity since he has the ability to find common aspects of belonging in both the Egyptian and the Sudanese culture, nature, and religion. Badr, no matter how far he gets absorbed in his life problems, always remembers why he is alive: "to struggle for the here and now but not lose sight of the end: to put meat in his children's small mouths and sweets in Hanniyah's enchanting mouth" (Aboulela, Lyrics Alley 23).

Conclusion

Although *Lyrics Alley* is not the most famous novel by Aboulela, it captures the intercultural dilemma that more than one-character faces between Egypt and Sudan. The process of embracing their integrated cultural identities is not easy for any of the characters discussed in this paper. Aboulela's characters—who are based on her own family members—reflect both the pain and the beauty of accepting the different and seemingly different cultural aspects of who they are.

In *Lyrics Alley*, Aboulela offers the process of cultural integration and acceptance through more than one character: through a whole Sudanese-Egyptian family that exerts the effort, empathy, and courage to overcome fissures and struggles. Before Nur's accident, each of the discussed characters—whether Egyptian or Sudanese—had his/her own prejudices about the other culture represented in the traditions-versus-modernization dichotomy. However, after Nur's accident, the characters start to—or are obliged to—embrace the intercultural differences between Egypt and Sudan in a humanistic nonfairy tale style. The Egyptian characters, Nabilah and Badr, decide to continue living in Sudan with a sense of gratitude that was not emphasized earlier. The Sudanese characters, Mahmoud and Waheeba, get to become more flexible about their hopes for Nur, where Mahmoud abandons his business aspirations for his son and Waheeba stops disdaining the fact that Nur writes poetry. Thus, Nur—through his pain—helps all these characters to be more open about who they truly are. Since characters like Mahmoud, Nabilah, Nur, and Badr are able to go through the process of self-understanding and willingly choose to embrace their past and present experiences and changing locations, they succeed in becoming Arab Afropolitan individuals who are no longer confined by essentialized cultural fixations.

Conflicts of interest

The author certifies that she has no affiliations or involvement with any organization or entity with any financial or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

Works Cited

Angelou, Maya. And Still I Rise. Virago Press, 2020.

Atwood, Margaret. Stone Mattress: Nine Tales. First Anchor Books edition, Anchor Books, 2015.

Atwood, Margaret. “The Dead Land Loves You.” The New Yorker, 6 June 2022.

Chen, Min, and Shira Lee. “Exploring Eco-Justice Themes in Young Adult Literature.” Green Education Review, vol. 12, no. 2, 2018, pp. 87–101.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. The Great Gatsby. Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925.

Garcia, Laura. “Nature Writing and Environmental Activism: A Study of Contemporary Authors.” Environmental Humanities Quarterly, vol. 7, no. 4, 2019, pp. 309–325.

Hamzah, Krisna Deni M., et al. “Conflict of Resilience in Maya Angelou’s ‘Still I Rise’ (1978): Psychosocial Analysis.” Prologue: Journal on Language and Literature, vol. 9, no. 2, 2023, pp. 141–153. https://doi.org/10.36277/jurnalprologue.v9i2.104.

Jones, K. “Environmental Justice in Indigenous Literature.” Journal of Native American Studies, vol. 22, no. 5, 2018, pp. 176–192.

Kidd, David C., and Emanuele Castano. “Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind.” Science, vol. 342, no. 6156, 2013, pp. 377–380.

Nye, Naomi Shihab. “Gate A-4.” In Honeybee, Greenwillow Books, 2008.

Nye, Naomi Shihab. Words under the Words: Selected Poems. Far Corner Books, 1995.

Patel, R., et al. “Climate Change Fiction: Imagining Sustainable Futures.” Sustainable Development Journal, vol. 18, no. 6, 2021, pp. 432–449.

Smith, J. “The Role of Fiction in Shaping Sustainable Narratives.” Journal of Environmental Literature, vol. 45, no. 3, 2020, pp. 211–225.

United Nations. “Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.” 2015, https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda.