

DISPLACING SPACES OF OTHERIZATION AND TRANSITION IN LEILA ABOULELA'S WRITING

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Abstract. This research examines the discursive formula of displacement and alienation, through analyzing Aboulela's *The Translator* and *Minaret*. This study draws on Michel Foucault's definition of heterotopias to disambiguate the novels configuration of space. Heterotopias are prefigured as spaces of illusion and compensation. They are places of deviation, resistance and counter-balance.

Keywords: Alienation, counter-balance, deviation, displacement, heterotopia, resistance.

LEYLA ƏBULELANIN YARADICILIĞINDA DİGƏRLƏŞDİRMƏ VƏ KEÇİD MƏKANLARININ DƏYİŞMƏSİ

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Xülasə. Məqalədə Leyla Əbulelanın "Tərcüməçi" və "Minarə" əsərləri təhlil edilərək yerdəyişmə və yadlaşmanın diskursiv düsturu araşdırılır. Burada romandakı məkan konfigurasiyasını dəqiqləşdirmək üçün Mişel Fukonun heterotopiya tərifindən istifadə edilir. Heterotopiyalar illüziya və kompensasiya məkanları kimi təcəssüm olunur. Bunlar sarma, müqavimət və natarazlıq yerləridir. **Açar sözlər:** Yadlaşdırma, qarşılıqlı tarazlıq, sarma, yerdəyişmə, heterotopiya, müqavimət.

СМЕЩЕНИЕ ПРОСТРАНСТВ ИНЕРИЗАЦИИ И ПЕРЕХОДА В ТВОРЧЕСТВЕ ЛЕЙЛЫ АБУЛЕЛЫ

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Резюме. Это исследование исследует дискурсивную формулу смещения и отчуждения посредством анализа «Переводчика» и «Минарета» Лейлы Абулелы. Это исследование опирается на определение гетеротопий Мишеля Фуко, чтобы устранить неоднозначность конфигурации пространства в романе. Гетеротопии представляют собой пространства иллюзий и компенсации. Это места отклонения, сопротивления и противовеса. **Ключевые слова:** Отчуждение, Противовес, Отклонение, Смещение, Гетеротопия, Сопротивление.

1. Introduction

The rise of diaspora and exile by the end of 20th century, has necessitated the adoption of multidisciplinary perspective in approaching literary analysis. Subsequently, literary excerpts are no longer scrutinized through singular lenses. Characteristic of diasporic Muslim women writing, in particular, is the amalgam of postcolonial, feminist and Oriental stands. Since movement "toward the postcolonial moment" brings about a "critique of transparent space and its false claim to mimetic representation" [9, p.100], attention has been paid to the post-isms and the emerging intersection between neo-imperialism and neo-patriarchy.

Diaspora writing, being emblematic of narratives of displacement, alienation and hybridity, has occupied a significant status in postcolonial criticism, garnering reevaluation and reconsideration of former literary works and theories. Diasporic sites as paradoxical spaces of

contradictions bring side by side East and West unresolved entanglements and foreshadow to the ramifications of the colonizer and colonized contention. As a minority in exiles, Muslim female writers pen stories of doubly and triply oppressed protagonists that are grappling with exploitative sympathy, assaulting stereotyping and unwelcomed fetishization. Whilst overwhelmed with the Western liberal overflow, they have at the same time to stand to patriarchal constraints that mostly stem from the homeland and often extends to persist in the host country as well, yet taking in new forms and operating through differing dynamics.

Conspicuously, the diasporic female writer is not solely diving against the hegemonic imperial mainstreaming but rather wrestling against Western feminist accounts which fell short of providing a truly inclusionary and catering theoretical framework for third world, colonized, Eastern, Muslim and uprooted women. Western feminism proposition of women as one fixed, heterogeneous entity that shares the same concerns and aspirations, notwithstanding their dissimilar social classes, ethnic and racial “location or contradictions” [8, p.337], overlooks intrinsic ideologies of postcolonial women. Accordingly, their peculiarities are rather reduced and outweighed by yet another hegemonic and centric doctrine.

2. Aboulela’s Writing

Leila Aboulela, who was born in 1964 in Cairo for a Sudanese father and Egyptian mother, is writer of six novels, with *The Translator*, *Minaret* and *The Kindness of Enemies* as mostly acclaimed and two collections of short stories. Even though she was born in Egypt, Aboulela grew up in Sudan and later moved to Scotland, UK, where her literary career has ever since burgeoned. Henceforth, her works are rather semi-autobiographical and reflection of her own experiences and struggles as a devout Muslim immigrant in the UK. Aboulela mirrors the constraints and the hardships of co-existing in an antagonistic and disapproving setting that curbs one’s non-conforming ideological traits.

As an inhabitant of in-betweenness, Aboulela, has the privilege of translating her culture for her Western readers and at the same time be immune to Western deluding propaganda. As she clarifies in her interview by *Brittle Paper* that being a bilingual encourages her to access primary texts in their unedited and untranslated forms [4], rendering her a reliable representative of her people. Aboulela’s novels and stories are stirred and fuelled by the homesickness that consumed her in the exile. The words and narratives that crowded in her head are birthed by the muddled sense of unsettlement, as she confirms, “If I go back to Sudan, I will never write again” [1, p.204].

In one of her essays, “Moving Away from Accuracy”, Aboulela illustrates that in spite of all her political views and accomplishments as an individual, there has only been one question that Western people in the exile cared to repeatedly ask her:

‘Where do you come from, Leila?’ I then have to go through the routine, a script, though sometimes I deviate, get carried away... 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 [1, p.198].

As the lines prevail Aboulela grasp of space is troubled and confounded in between binary opposite of the here and there. Absolutely, the long years she spent in Scotland failed to grant her a true pertinence. An elsewhere place always existed in her mind and consisted an essential part of who she was.

Such a confusion is reflected in her novels setting composition, *The Translator* and *Minaret*. Both novels are set in the exile and narrate stories of uprooted female protagonists that are ungrounded and in search of a solid and balancing self-image. Sammar, in *The Translator*, is struggling to pave her escape out of the traumatic confines of the death of her husband, Tarig. Sammar exile started since the day he passed away rather than the time she moved to Scotland, UK. To fill such a void, she heads back home to Sudan, only to no avail. However, such a journey reformulates and amends her perception of home.

Minaret parallels the feelings of un-belonging, spatial confusion and alienation that were portrayed in *The Translator*. It was published in 2005 as her second masterpiece. Likewise, it unfolds Najwa's journey in London after she was forced to escape Sudan. Her father, a high ranked statement was left behind to the teeth of a gruelling civil war. Najwa who had previously spent summer vacations in London with her family which owned a house there, was quick to adapt and even quicker to lose herself and her sense of identity. To overcome the overwhelming turmoil of her family's dooming prospect, Najwa exerted herself in absorbing Western culture to only be drowned and further distance from her genuine self.

3. Heterotopic Configuration

The displacement and spatial deformation haunting Aboulela's perception of space is mainly reflected in her novels, *The Translator* and *Minaret*, in a form of heterotopic spaces. Heterotopia as a conception emanates from Michel Foucault's critical work, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias". As the word alludes, a key to the concept's designation is grasped through defining its counterpart, 'utopia', which refers to an inexistent version of the world that delineates a perfect and idealistic image of society [6, p.133]. Heterotopia, in the other hand, embodies an existent real space, "like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted" [7, p.24].

Heterotopia comprises spaces of otherness which lead to the realization of utopia. According to Foucault, heterotopia falls into two subdivision, that are of crisis and deviation. Heterotopia of crisis refers to the sacred and prohibited spaces, that are devoted for those who are in a status of crisis as in the case of pregnant women, mentally defective individuals, elderly and handicapped people. In today's modern society, these forms of heterotopias are rather becoming obsolete and lapsing. However, the disappearance of the former is overbalanced by the emergence of heterotopia of deviation, which stands for a form that parallels modern world

dynamics. It encompasses places that house individuals who lead a lifestyle that deviates from the society's standards and norms, inter alia people in prisons, mental hospitals and retirement homes [7, p.25].

4. Heterotopia of Crisis in *The Translator*

Drawing on Foucault's explanation on social spaces construction and diversion, Sammar's house is rather prefigured as heterotopic space of crisis. *The Translator* already parts the curtains on Sammar who is rather in a medias res of a crisis and traumatic experience of losing her husband, whom her whole life centred around. *The Translator's* opening lines portraying Sammar abnormality in comparison to Aberdeen inhabitants whose life unlike her was not paused by the rain. Sammar's gloominess and her refuge to her apartment as a prison whilst watching the rest of people's liveliness in the streets, corners her house as a parallel space of otherness.

Foucault set forth principles to regulate and delineate heterotopic places peculiarities. Probing such a definitive principles, time lapse is highly prefigured. As he explicates Heterotopia is attached to temporal aberration, lapses and 'heterochronies'. It is fully realized when a person deviates and breaks with the "traditional" time and its norms [7, p.26]. This falls in line with Sammar's almost complete detachment from time. As Aboulela narrates, "Since Tarig died she had not bought anything new. She had not noticed time moving past, the years eroding the clothes Tarig had seen her in" [3, p.47]. Aboulela further portrays the temporal deviation that engulfed the place, stating "For years, as if there were a fog blocking her vision, a dreamy heaviness everywhere" [3, p.47].

Sammar falls into a functional void. She is no longer the wife and mother who knows what to do and where she belongs. She broke from the society's available roles and norms. Unlike her surrounding she is overwhelmed by abnormality and sense of unfitting. Such feelings are reverberated on her dwelling space which has been for four years adjusted to nest and preserve her non-functionality and critical case, isolating it from the rest of all spaces as a place harbouring and sheltering a crisis. Sammar has often described it as a "hospital room", further accentuating its function and bringing about its resemblance to Foucault's example of "psychiatric hospital" as heterotopic space [7, p.25].

5. Heterotopia of Transition in *Minaret*

In *Minaret*, the exile in general and all its pertinent diasporic spaces are depicted as heterotopic, deviant and incompatible. In line with Foucault's principles, Heterotopia can take a form of a space of illusion, which is unarranged, "messy, ill constructed and jumbled" and rather work to disclose and unmask real spaces [7, p.27]. Likewise the exilic space in *Minaret* has exposed the double standards, systematic racism and oppression endured in the Western territory which claims otherwise. The idealized picture the West draws about itself is tarnished

by diasporic spaces which tattle and reveal its hidden and paradoxical truth. For instance, the bus incident, where the three young men passengers, threw stuff, poured liquid on Najwa and insulted her with rude and shaming words, “Muslim scum” [2, p.76], declines the UK’s claims of itself as an idealistic land of tolerance and freedom.

Furthermore, Najwa’s outfit with a veiled and decent dressing and Eastern facial miens in a Western land, brings about Foucault’s postulation that “The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” [7, p.25]. In other words, her presence side by side with Westerners triggers sense of heterogeneity and calls for multi-spatiality within a single spot.

Through similar lines, Lisa Ahrens in her book, *The Transformative Potential of Black British and British Muslim Literature* (2019), discusses issues of belonging, alienation and exclusion of Muslims in the confines of British exile by shedding light on the dynamics of the mosque as a heterotopic space in Aboulela’s *Minaret*. She builds her supposition on two basis. First she expands on Foucault’s sixth principle which divides heterotopias functions into two, illusion and compensation. The latter refers to the places that compensate for the flaws and deficiencies of the society by representing “perfect, meticulous and well-arranged” space that is a counterpart to its “disordered, ill-conceived and in a sketchy state” [5, p.47].

Secondly, Ahrens recalls Foucault’s definition, which delineates heterotopias as spaces that represent and at the same time challenge and counter the society’s current dynamic, which is, in the case of *Minaret*, embodied in “social exclusion and power imbalance” [5, p.48]. Accordingly, it could be deduced that the heterotopic potential of Regent’s Park mosque, which is often visited by Najwa, resides in its catering of an ideal space that grants equality, tolerance and inclusion to Muslims who are discriminated, hated and excluded by the rest of the society. It compensates, counters and withstands the society’s hostile attitude by providing a safe place of acceptance and peace.

Conclusion. Drawing on *The Translator* and *Minaret*, Aboulela’s turbulent experiences of displacement and spatial in-betweenness are heavily reflected on her fictional narratives. Aboulela, as a daughter of Sudanese and Egyptian parents and yet later on an immigrant in the UK, never fails in interpreting distorted spatial configuration of diaspora into discursive means. Her novels usually portray heterotopic spaces of crisis and deviation that shelter socially excluded exilic subjects. Relying on Foucault’s explanation of the conception, Aboulela seems to resort to the creation of such parallel spaces of otherness, primarily, as places of resistance and defiance to socially oppressive mechanisms and power imbalance.

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