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Toward postmigrant realities in Leila Aboulela's *Elsewhere, Home*

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journals.sagepub.com/home/jcl**Lena Englund** 

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Abstract

The number of migration narratives published in recent years in the form of short stories, novels, poetry, and nonfiction has been considerable, particularly by writers connected with the African continent. Previous studies on this body of work have included investigations of identity and otherness, transnational connections, and cosmopolitan aspirations. Despite this abundance of perspectives on the literature, there have also been urgent calls for new ways of theorizing migration (Fasselt, 2019; Kraler, 2011; Edmunds, 2006). Postmigration is just such an intervention, a concept that aims to go beyond previous meanings of migrant and migration, to critique instances of othering and the gap between the margins and the majority society (Römhild, 2017), and to focus explicitly on trajectories relating to the future. Postmigration, as outlined by Roger Bromley (2017: 39), is not a concept solely tied to temporal distinctions, but is also ideological in its attempts to construct “a new set of emergent spaces of plurality”. The present article argues that Leila Aboulela’s short story collection *Elsewhere, Home* (2018) manifests such spaces, particularly through its representations and negotiations of gender, family practices, generation, and religious belief and practice. My analysis shows that Aboulela subverts tropes regarding gendered and religious identity and mobility. *Elsewhere, Home* is no longer primarily occupied with the displacement of individual characters but moves toward seeing migration as interaction and participation instead of integration (Moslund and Petersen, 2019), and as transcultural (Petersen and Schramm, 2017) instead of transnational.

Keywords

Leila Aboulela, *Elsewhere, Home*, family, gender, generation, postmigration, religion

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The contemporary moment has seen a veritable outpouring of migration narratives in the form of short stories, novels, poetry, and nonfiction, particularly by writers connected with the African continent. Many of these writers, including Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Taiye Selasi, Brian Chikwava, Chika Unigwe and NoViolet Bulawayo, have been extensively studied from perspectives of cosmopolitanism and Afropolitanism (Toivanen, 2018; Phiri, 2017; Knudsen and Rahbek, 2017), identity and alterity (Berning, 2015; Okolocha, 2016; De Mul, 2014), and dislocation and exploitation (Moji, 2014; Cobo-Piñero, 2018; Ligaga, 2019). However, despite this abundance of perspectives on writers and their works which are often labelled migrant, there have also been urgent calls for new ways of theorizing migration (Fasselt, 2019; Kraler, 2011; Edmunds, 2006). This suggests that the present moment requires novel perspectives on migration that go beyond earlier discussions of diaspora, transnationalism, and questions of belonging. This need is also reflected in fiction, which captures the disparate experiences of migration and demands new concepts for its proper analysis.

Leila Aboulela's short story collection *Elsewhere, Home* exemplifies such migrant writing which goes beyond notions of diasporic lives and transnational experiences, providing an opportunity to rethink the migrant and migration as "socio-historical process" (Huggan, 2008: 35). Such aims are embedded in the concept of postmigration, which has been developed in recent years and attempts to go beyond previous meanings of migrant and migration to question the reasons for othering migrants and to criticize the gap between the margins and the majority society (Römhild, 2017). It also aspires to focus explicitly on trajectories relating to the future. Postmigration, as outlined by Roger Bromley, is not as a concept solely tied to temporal distinctions, but is also ideological in its attempts to construct "a new set of emergent spaces of plurality" (Bromley, 2017: 39). The utopian dimension of postmigration has thus also been noted (Moslund et al., 2019: 228). The present article argues that *Elsewhere, Home* manifests such spaces particularly through its representations and negotiations of gender, family practices, and generation as well as religious belief and practice.

Leila Aboulela's fiction has raised considerable scholarly interest over the last two decades. This interest has come from perspectives of migration and religion in particular, and the themes and topics her works cover participate in debates surrounding such issues. In *The Translator* (2008/1999), Sudanese-born Sammar falls in love with Scottish Rae, and the story culminates with his conversion to Islam towards the end of the novel. The novel *Minaret* (2005), for its part, focuses on the complexities of being a Muslim in London, as the main character Najwa, another Sudanese immigrant, rediscovers her faith in the city. A somewhat similar outcome concludes a more recent novel, *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015), in which it is implied that the protagonist Natasha will attempt to rekindle and relearn her faith. Yousef Awad (2018: 76) argues that this novel "captures the sense of alienation" emerging from the treatment of Muslims in the West, and such alienation is at the core of Aboulela's earlier novels too. *Bird Summons* (2019), in turn, follows three Muslim women on their quest to rediscover themselves and their purpose in life and to take stock of previous decisions made. Religion and migration emerge here as well but do not take centre stage to the same degree as in earlier texts, and the women's search for meaning and guidance is not solely defined in religious terms. In an interview with Keija Parssinen (2020: n.p.), Aboulela explains: "With regard to my writing, I found

that with time my characters started to feel more at ease in Britain. They experienced homesickness less and less and started to behave as if they were citizens of the world". This development can be detected in *Bird Summons* but also in *Elsewhere, Home* as the analysis will show, and Aboulela's comment also justifies the present study.

Much of Aboulela's earlier writing centres on the idea of the return, not necessarily a return to a country of birth or supposed homeland — although many of her characters do struggle with their identities and finding a sense of belonging — but a return to Islam. The future trajectories of Aboulela's characters are embedded in these negotiations of home, religious identity, and belonging in national, familial, and social contexts. *Elsewhere, Home*, however, is not centred on a single character and their narrative arc as a migrant and a Muslim. Instead, the volume deals with a variety of characters negotiating their lives and identities in a number of ways. The suggested future prospects are also more varied and fragmented, simultaneously mirroring the fragmentation of short stories as a literary form. Many of the stories in the collection were originally published between 1999 and 2017, offering the possibility to examine a development or transition in how migration is represented and from what perspectives. The collection can be argued to belong to a new generation of migration narratives, one which has long since left behind earlier transnational celebrations. The contemporary moment is no longer solely about diasporic notions of "feeling some gap in between, a gap into which you might fall culturally" (Wisker, 2007: 98), but starts from a position where "diaspora is becoming the norm" (Bartels et al., 2019: 80). This notion suggests that a postmigrant society is already in the making, and Aboulela demonstrates with her stories just what such a society may look like.

Postmigration as a conceptual tool

For this article, the notion of postmigration as a conceptual tool is not about alternative modes of migration, which are emphasized by Rebecca Fasselt (2019: 76) in her chapter on narratives of intra-African migration, but instead it offers novel ways of seeing migration as an inherent component of society. The focus has shifted from the actual movement from one place to another to what comes beyond. Thus, reading contemporary migration narratives such as those presented in *Elsewhere, Home* through a postmigration lens enables a moving past earlier preoccupations with the displacement of individual characters. It also facilitates a view of migration as interaction instead of integration and as transcultural (Petersen and Schramm, 2017: 2) rather than transnational.

As Anne Ring Petersen, Moritz Schramm, and Frauke Wiegand (2019: 3) state, the concept of postmigration was originally developed by people working with performance arts and not in academic contexts, but has since been adopted into academic research and discourse. It began as a protest against the use of the term "migrant" and its exclusionary features (Petersen et al., 2019: 4). Since these early applications of the term, three distinct phases of development have been recognized. First, the focus was on critiquing the way people kept being referred to as migrants despite never having relocated themselves. Another strand takes issue with society as a whole instead of focusing solely on those who have arrived from elsewhere, and the third use of the term sees society itself as

postmigrant (Petersen et al., 2019: 5). Thus, postmigration is an ideological intervention aimed to reconsider and reinvent migration discourses.

This has been noted by Christina West too, who emphasizes that postmigration does not entail an “epochal change” (2019: 261) but implies “the encouragement to rethink the significance and connotation of migration” (2019: 261). Her research article takes the urban condition as its focal point and calls for new understandings of urbanity in terms of migration. Meanwhile, Bromley (2017: 36) warns against too frequent use of the term belonging, and Aboulela’s stories attest to the complexities involved with it. As her stories show, belonging and identity can also mean different things across the generational divide and do not always necessarily relate to ethnic, national, or racial concerns (Moslund and Petersen, 2019: 72). This is exemplified in the short stories “Expecting to Give” and “Farida’s Eyes”. The protagonists in both stories are preoccupied with their bodies, one being pregnant with her first child and the other struggling with poor eyesight. The collection allows for a multitude of perspectives and experiences to come forth, some of them explicitly centred on migration and others barely touching upon the topic. An examination of the short stories therefore allows us to put migration centre stage while never giving it precedence over other topics and concerns.

Literature and postmigration have been brought together before, even though the concept first originated in connection with theatre performances. The question as to how narratives can be analysed from a postmigrant perspective has also been raised previously:

How do contemporary artistic narratives contribute to the “storying” of postmigrant and transcultural belongings, and can they provide us with vantage points from which to consider the mechanisms of othering and racism that can help us overcome the ongoing racialisation of those members of societies who are perceived as “other”? (Petersen and Schramm, 2017: 2)

One response to this question is provided by Sten Pultz Moslund (2019: 95–96) who analyses Zadie Smith’s novel *NW* (2012) from a postmigration vantage point. Moslund argues that literature can be examined in relation to four features in particular: moving away from “certain anxieties [...] in relation to minority status or marginalization and identity crises caused by cultural and racialized alienation” (Moslund, 2019: 95), no longer dealing specifically with experiences of migration, gravitating toward realism instead of “spectacular dramas of movement, hybridity and double-visions” (Moslund, 2019: 95), and fourthly not necessarily depicting an explicitly “black” or “ethnic” experience. These four features are central for the analysis of Aboulela’s short stories, as her stories too exhibit some of these — at least, in part. As Moslund and Petersen (2019: 72) state, the challenge is to read “the migratory as it is entwined with other than specifically migratory issues” (Moslund and Petersen, 2019: 72). In the examination of *Elsewhere, Home* which follows, I aim to address these issues in particular, while also offering new ground on which to keep developing the concept of postmigration: a need that has also been highlighted in previous research (Moslund and Petersen, 2019: 73).

Elsewhere, Home provides tacit examples of the theoretical issues raised here, and gives an indication of the usefulness of postmigration as a conceptual tool. The short story collection also participates in subverting stereotypical images of African migration,

a movement which should not automatically be linked to poverty and violence (Flahaux and De Haas, 2016: 1–2). Aboulela as the quintessential migrant writer is of course another problematic category, and my aim is not to pigeonhole her writing more than has already been done. However, as Wail S. Hassan's analysis (2008) of her works shows, much of Aboulela's fiction focuses on migration from Sudan to Europe (2008: 300), while Yousef Awad (2018: 72) for his part asserts that her writing "depicts the lives of Muslims in Britain". Compared to her previous novels, the stories in *Elsewhere, Home* offer fragments of the lives of a variety of characters who go about their lives often with relative ease but remaining mindful of their pasts and presents, their multiple roles and identities in complex family settings and circumstances.

Hence, the three themes at the centre of the present analysis; gendered family practices, generation and religion, all overlap to a significant degree and have also informed much if not all of Aboulela's previous writing. Peter Morey (2018: 302) argues that "the imperatives of belief are at the centre of her work", Hassan (2008: 299) states that much of her fiction addresses "the status of women in male-dominated societies", and Lucinda Newns (2018: 289–290) connects Aboulela's writing with the term "domestic fiction". A final comment by Susan Taha Al-Karawi and Ida Baizura Bahar (2014: 256) emphasizes these perspectives: "Aboulela's work [...]fills a gap in Western representations of Muslim women". The risk here is to perpetuate othering in Aboulela's portrayal of Muslims and particularly women in the UK or elsewhere through such categorization, but her writing also highlights the postmigrant condition in unique ways, especially through these three interlinked themes. As Lindsey Zanchettin (2013: 40) states, Aboulela's short stories describe an "African experience that is plural rather than singular, familiar rather than exotic and other, relevant and central rather than token and peripheral". These are all features of postmigrant writing as well, whereby migration is regarded as a familiar and everyday experience though without ignoring its unique effects on individuals.

Gendered family practices and the generational gap

Previous migration research has detected knowledge deficits in relation to family (König and de Regt, 2010; Kraler, 2011), gender (Hibbins and Pease, 2009), and religion (Frederiks, 2015). The importance of examining fiction has also been justified in earlier studies: "An awareness of the heterogenous perspectives on the migration-religion nexus permits a deeper understanding of the multiple ways in which age, generation and life-stage influence, and are influenced by, migratory experiences and religious identity and identification alike" (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2016: 155). Such heterogeneous perspectives can be found particularly in literature, and this is also echoed in Mies van Niekerk's (2007: 1075) research: "Ethnic identification is, in short, more complicated than can be reflected in survey research". Fictional accounts with their reimaginings of reality help transform political and social discourses, and this is confirmed by scholars. Jane Kilby and Antony Rowland (2014: 6) state the following in their work on testimony and witnessing: "Imagination in an absolute sense makes the world real, and real with endless possibilities; without it, there is no possibility of change". Anke Bartels et al. confirm these notions: "[F]orms of cultural expression help to push the limits of what is thinkable and unthinkable, possible and impossible" (2019: 17).

As such, an examination of *Elsewhere, Home* from the perspectives of gender, generation, and religion may shed light on contemporary postmigrant society. This concerns both its majority and minority citizens since Aboulela is, as a writer, “cognizant of a global audience” (Zanchettin, 2013: 47) but also works to create that global audience and world herself. For example, the story entitled “Souvenirs” features Yassir and Manaal, a brother and sister, who decide to visit an English painter a day before Yassir is set to leave Khartoum and go back home to Aberdeen and his Scottish wife and daughter (Aboulela, 2018: 69).¹ Ronan K., the painter, turns out to know some Arabic, and Yassir silently wonders how well he speaks the language (78–79). The roles are reversed, as the Englishman has become the immigrant whose language skills evoke curiosity among those born in the country. It is disclosed that Ronan has been in Khartoum for 15 years and watches plane take off and land at the airport not far from his house. He declares, “I see the fat bellies of planes full of people going away” (81). This indicates a sense of home, of being the one staying put while others leave, suggesting a certain permanence. This brief example highlights the blurring of majority versus minority society, of migration becoming part of society in multifaceted ways. Ronan in Khartoum is the immigrant, and Yassir is the local man whose life is now in Aberdeen where he himself is the immigrant. With this story, Aboulela shows that a postmigrant society can be born out of such encounters between people of different origins, contradicting simplistic notions of how migrants define themselves or are defined by others.

In sum, *Elsewhere, Home* consists of 13 independent stories which all more or less centre around family and which could be termed domestic fiction (News, 2018: 288). Several of them have been published before (216) and the stories therefore originate from different periods of the author’s writing career. In terms of postmigration, many of the stories predate the concept. This makes an analysis of emerging postmigrant aesthetics even more worthwhile, as the temporal distance between the various stories enables a chronological study of the themes at hand and discovering potential transformations and changes in terms of how they are dealt with.

The first story in the collection, “Summer Maze”, is one of the most recent ones. It offers two distinct perspectives on the experience of migration and notions of home and belonging from across a generational divide. Daughter Nadia and mother Lateefa travel from the UK to Cairo for the summer as they have done many times before. The story is first told from Nadia’s point of view, as someone who “could not really think of herself as Egyptian, nor did she want to [...] On every trip she would long for London and promise herself she would not come again” (3). Nadia struggles to understand Arabic, a language she used to be fluent in as a child but later lost. Despite her reluctance to visit Cairo and embarrassment about her mother’s habits (2), “she could also change the lens and see what her mother saw” (4). This indicates that Nadia resides between her two cultures, profoundly transcultural, not unable to understand her mother’s views even though they exasperate her. In this regard, Nadia embodies what Andre Renzaho, Nidhi Dhingra, and Nichole Georgeou have termed the “intergenerational acculturation gap” (2017: 1).

However, Nadia’s complex position is also emphasized in an encounter she has with an English couple by the Sphinx. “She moved towards the couple, drawn to their familiar

tones, eager for a flicker of recognition, an encouragement to say hello. But when they looked up at her they saw someone different from them, an Egyptian girl at the foot of that large pyramid in Giza” (11). Nadia understands the separation between them, that the pyramids and other Egyptian tourist attractions were “her heritage whether she wanted it or not” (12). She is othered, presumed to belong in Egypt, which she does but in complex ways and partly not of her own choosing. Like Ronan K. and Yassir in “Souvenirs”, Nadia too exemplifies a complex transcultural belonging and that “complex mix of filiation” discussed by Bromley (2017: 39). For her mother Lateefa it is perhaps more stereotypically London which presents a challenge: “In London I pass laments back and forth with other mothers. [...] Someone’s son converted to Christianity, another’s daughter works in a bar” (19). Salma in *Bird Summons* expresses similar concerns about her children and their relationship: “I’m losing them. Day by day, they get older and more British and sometimes I hardly know them any more” (Aboulela, 2019: 181–182). Such anxieties speak not only to the migration experience where the children are so-called second generation immigrants, but also, as the term itself implies, to the generational differences.

Lateefa thought the trip would result in an engagement between Nadia and her cousin, and her disappointment is considerable when she finds out that Khalid is to marry another girl (16). Khalid’s mother Salwa, Lateefa’s friend, scolds her old-fashioned views: “Parents no longer control their children or even know what they are up to! Lateefa *habibti*, you are lagging behind. It is as if, by being away, time stood still for you!” (18). Such an inability to move with the times has been detected in research into Muslim women as well, with Monica Accordini, Cristina Giuliani, and Marialuisa Gennari (2018: 16) stating that their interviews with Muslim female immigrants showed a “shift towards more conservative values”. Their findings show that the use of the veil is one indicator of such conservatism (2018: 16). However, at the centre of the story is not Lateefa’s conservatism due to religion but Salwa’s observation that she is “lagging behind”. The generational gap is evident, and Aboulela also contradicts any notion of women in Egypt being more traditional than those who have left. The postmigrant condition is present in the story exactly through Nadia’s understanding of her heritage and her mother’s views, reconciling their contrasting perspectives in her decision to study Arabic for a year (19). Nadia’s decision works to close the acculturation gap to some extent.

Salma in *Bird Summons* is also able to overcome some of her anxieties about the growing distance between her and her children, as she understands the irrevocable connection she has to the place where she now lives even though she herself was not born there: “[T]hrough her children she was part of the history of this country. [...] No matter what happened, her lineage would remain, bits of her DNA. She might be forgotten but her mark would have been made” (Aboulela, 2019: 239). Complex filiations emerge as ordinary and everyday, and this in turn participates in the creation of spaces and identities of plurality. Lateefa and Salma emphasize the role of origins and bloodlines and take comfort from their motherhood, but they also understand the separateness of their children, not just in terms of where they were born and grew up but in relation to themselves. Salma understands this to a deeper degree than Lateefa, which indicates that the time passed between the writing of the two stories has changed perspectives just as Aboulela herself indicated.

A different type of mother–daughter relationship is presented in the last story in the collection, “Pages of Fruit”, whose protagonist is an avid reader of a particular author’s stories which speak to her as they describe a “privileged childhood similar to mine. A highly educated family who could afford to travel to London for holidays and degrees. A family in which the children were brought up to dress, eat and speak differently (i.e. more Westernised) than their elders” (194). The reader forms a one-sided relationship with the author, sending letters and feeling kinship although “[y]ou belonged in Britain better than I did” (197). Here, gender becomes secondary, although the story also reveals that the protagonist is relieved when she gets her period as she does not want to be pregnant again. This suggests a lack of agency in reproductive terms.

However, Aboulela does not inscribe religion with too much meaning, and again the generational aspect and family bond emerge as more significant: “My mother was neither more nor less Muslim than others, she was different because of her personality” (200). The downside of the mother’s worldview is that her “particular kind of feminism could not accommodate sisterhood” (201). The protagonist’s search for such sisterhood, for a real connection, is evident throughout the story. “Pages of Fruit” ends with the main character moving with her family to Abu Dhabi where she makes a professional life for herself, finally earning the approval of her mother who had almost given up on her (206–207). Migration becomes a secondary experience in comparison to the emotional complexities involved in mother–daughter interactions.

The relational aspect of the story is a primary theme: the longing for connection and recognition, for a bond between women. However, this desire and need is not expressed in terms of migration, of wanting an anchor to which to attach oneself — an anchor in the shape of a person with similar background and experiences. Instead, the story speaks to the human need for connection, where migration becomes the perspective and not the subject (Römhild, 2017: 73), a point of departure but not the defining experience. The stay-at-home mother is a disappointment to her own mother who is a successful businesswoman, reversing the acculturation gap in contrast to Lateefa and Nadia, where Lateefa the mother is the more traditional.

One of the earliest stories “Coloured Lights” offers yet another perspective on generational belonging that also encompasses homesickness. The protagonist misses her family as she works for the BBC in London while her husband is employed in Kuwait and their daughters are being looked after by her parents in Khartoum (148). The separation of families due to career-related reasons is described as “the fate of our generation. [...] We are ready to go anywhere in search of the work we cannot find at home” (149). Similar notions are expressed in *The Translator* (Aboulela, 2008/1999: 145, 175) where Sammar’s brother wants to leave Khartoum and find work elsewhere, not believing in a future in Sudan. The mobile identities depicted in “Coloured Lights”, which was originally published in 2001, seem a far cry from any cosmopolitan celebration of world citizenship. That said, the protagonist and her husband Hamid could certainly be seen as belonging to such a group, not finding themselves at the margins of society by any means with their successful professional careers, but still feeling alienation due to family separation. Neither participation nor integration are exemplified in the story, which to some extent goes beyond belonging and nationality and instead focuses on the economic

realities forcing people apart. Migration becomes a necessary means to an end, where the future remains as much in limbo as the characters of the story.

With regard to the issues raised above, the following passage may offer valuable insights: “Migration represents individuals’ belonging and positioning within family and gender structures and relations but, at the same time, the migratory process can lead to a reformulation of gender and generational roles within both the productive and reproductive spheres” (Kofman et al., 2011: 35). Aboulela’s stories represent such reformulations while also acknowledging the clashes that may emerge within families due to generational differences, or gendered expectations as with those we saw at work in “Summer Maze”. As my analysis shows, her stories subvert ideas of “the prototypical (presumed economic) migrant characterized as the single male and the woman positioned as dependent or victim” (Palmary et al., 2010: 4). As Lan Anh Hoang asserts, recent migration studies indicate “new meanings of gender emerging from transnational interactions” (2016: 892). It is precisely these interactions which imply a postmigrant condition in the making. As will be argued in the following section on religious identities in the stories, Aboulela constantly plays with various expectations and tropes relating to women and men on the move.

Mobile religious identities

Being Muslim in Britain is a recurring topic for many of the stories in *Elsewhere, Home*, but Aboulela also addresses religion and faith from perspectives not directly connected with the Muslim immigrant. As suggested earlier, much of her previous writing explores experiences of alienation and marginalization due to religious affiliation, and many of her novels include characters who struggle with their own religious identities. Such issues emerge in *Elsewhere, Home* too, but here the difference in how topics are dealt with is noticeable when comparing earlier and later stories in the collection. The stories “The Museum”, “Majed”, “The Ostrich”, and “The Boy From the Kebab Shop” were originally published in the years 1999–2001 and thus belong to Aboulela’s earlier oeuvre. In relation to religion in particular, the characters from these stories question their belonging in whatever place they have relocated to, highlighting the difference between the majority society and the margins in which they deem themselves to reside. Belonging is largely defined along ethnic, racial, and religious lines, contradicting any postmigrant hopes and aspirations for a more inclusive society.

Shadia in “The Museum” exemplifies these anxieties perhaps most explicitly of all the characters in *Elsewhere, Home*. She feels out of place, struggling to cope at university, an experience shared by other international students. “Us and them, she thought. The ones who would do well, the ones who would crawl and sweat and barely pass. Two predetermined groups” (158). The international students bond over their shared fears and feelings of alienation (160). Shadia’s attitude to Bryan who helps her with her studies and takes an interest in her, and to Scotland as a place, is also condemning and unkind. “He probably came from a small town”, she sneers to herself, “his parents were probably poor, low class. In Khartoum, she never mixed with people like that” (165). In an attempt to alleviate her feeling of being an outsider, Shadia places herself above Bryan and treats him with open contempt.

On discovering that Bryan is from Peterhead, north of Aberdeen, she concludes that this must be a place of “dismal skies and pale, bad-tempered people shivering on the rocky shore” (170). Shadia fails to realize that she is the one being bad-tempered and metaphorically speaking shivering on a rocky shore where she feels nothing but alienation. Her reluctance to let anyone in turns her against the outside world, thus only reinforcing her otherness. Bryan reacts positively to the idea of being Muslim, taking Shadia by surprise as she expects him to have prejudices (173). The cultural clash between Shadia and Bryan is reversed: she remains wary and distrusting, while he is non-judgmental albeit somewhat naive, especially within the museum exhibiting its colonial artefacts. Feeling a connection with Bryan disturbs Shadia to such a degree that she pushes him away, preferring the familiar feeling of alienation and being on the outside. Postmigration seems a near impossible ideal in this story, which emphasizes cross-cultural misunderstandings and prejudices.

The theme of conservatism and complex alienation as examined above runs through another story in the collection in unexpected ways. The protagonist in the story “Majed” is Hamid, “born and bred on the banks of the Blue Nile” (109), married to Ruqiyah, a Scottish woman who “had not always been Ruqiyah, she was once someone else with an ordinary name, a name a girl behind the counter in the Bank of Scotland might have” (106). The clash between Hamid and Ruqiyah is, perhaps surprisingly, related to religion in ways that contradict any views of women as victims or lacking independence (Bonjour and de Hart, 2013: 65). Hamid drinks alcohol to forget the pressures of his PhD thesis (111), something Ruqiyah condemns. “She was so good, so strong, because she was a convert. But he, he had been a Muslim all his life and was, it had to be said, relaxed about the whole thing” (107). Further, Aboulela writes these telling sentences: “She wore hijab when she went out, she got up at dawn and prayed. This seriousness that he didn’t have, baffled him” (113). It is also revealed that the reason they married was because Hamid needed to solve his visa problem, and Ruqiyah needed security after a divorce from an abusive husband (109–110). Their marriage benefits both and places them on equal terms in that regard.

The previous husband Gavin resented Ruqiyah’s interest in Islam because it began refocusing her in ways beyond his control. Thus, the controlling husband — the stereotypically aggressive male — is not the migrant looking for an easy way to extend his visa, but the local man: the so-called native. The relational aspect is missing in the story, focusing as it does only on the dynamic between husband and wife, on each partner’s mutual disappointments in the other for not being devoted enough or for being too devoted. Ruqiyah’s decision to convert was made before meeting Hamid, and thus she has already reconstructed her identity as a Scottish Muslim. The mixed marriage storyline is inverted in an earlier story in the collection, “Something Old, Something New”, in which a Scottish man travels to Khartoum to marry a divorced Sudanese woman he met in Edinburgh. Once again, Aboulela explores the convert and their beliefs, not just within the surrounding society but in relational contexts as well. The female protagonist reflects: “She associated Islam with her dark skin, her African blood, her own weakness. She couldn’t really understand why anyone like him [her fiancé] would want to join the wretched of the world” (29). Religious belief becomes mixed with ethnicity here, and strongly relates to heritage, origins, and even skin colour. Again, the person with

prejudice is not the non-Muslim. However, the man's parents also struggle to come to terms with the conversion. When telling them that he was going to marry the woman, the parents seemed relieved, which suggests that they thought she was the reason he had converted (30).

The gap between the man and the woman is, however, about much more than just cultural heritage and national origins. "He was by nature cautious, wanting new things but held back by a vague mistrust" (25). This mistrust is exemplified in his reaction to her veil: "Because her hair was covered, she looked neat, slightly apart from everyone else" (27). This suggests an exoticization on the man's part. It transpires that they do not know each other very well (33), and both struggle to accept the unfamiliar in the other. This becomes clear when the man is robbed of his passport and valuables (35) and when he tries to give a boy in the street far too much money (37). Both are eventually humiliated, the woman at the British Embassy where she is suspected of having stolen his passport in her presumed desperation to leave Sudan, and the man when he hands over a large sum of money to the woman's brother as payment for wedding expenses, "as if he had paid for her" (43).

These lines reveal the difficulties in interaction as both feel themselves being culturally othered in unpleasant ways, eventually projecting it onto each other. The man and the woman are forced to reconsider their own views and cultures as the other makes them see themselves in a new light, and one that is not entirely favourable. Aboulela thus addresses the complexity of reconciling different cultures, habits, upbringings, and expectations in this union, making it a mirror of society more broadly. Neither is to blame for their views, but both are guilty of othering while feeling somewhat alienated themselves. The complexity of postmigration and the challenge of its envisioned futures are emphasized in these experiences.

These notions are further complicated in "The Ostrich" where Majdy has strong feelings and opinions about his wife wearing the veil or walking a few steps behind him in London, which he takes for signs of not being modern. "What would people think', he says, 'that we are backward, barbaric'" (56). A similar struggle to that of the man and woman in the previous story is visible here, albeit in completely different terms. The shame and guilt of wanting to belong while feeling somewhat alienated, and therefore projecting that feeling onto others is repeated. Majdy's wife Samra is more devout than he, and misses the ease of praying in Sudan: "I would know that I was part of this harmony, that I needed no permission to belong. [...] Here in London, Majdy does not pray. 'This country,' he says, 'chips away at your faith bit by bit'" (96). Majdy has embraced his new home in an attempt to fit in, whereas Samra is unwilling to change to the same degree, and both struggle to maintain a balance between old and new identities. Diaspora is definitely not the norm for the couple who tackle their alienation in opposite ways. With the creation of these characters, Aboulela shows how difficult postmigrant society is to accomplish. That is true even for those who have moved themselves, and to whom openness and a normalization of the migration experience is the most urgent.

Another complex interaction for more explicitly religious reasons is shown in "The Boy from the Kebab Shop" in which Dina, whose mother is Egyptian and father Scottish but whose "ties to Islam were fragile and distant" (121), comes to know Kassim. Kassim similarly has a Scottish father and Moroccan mother, but for him Islam is "a rhythmic

reality, a feasible way of living” (125). Again the storyline centres on the character potentially finding their way back to Islam. The story ends with Dina watching Kassim pray, feeling torn as to what she should do: “He was inviting her to his faith, her faith really, because she had been born into it” (132). Dina would not be a convert like Ruqiyah or the man meeting his fiancée in Khartoum, and this is quite contrary to what Peter Morey has claimed about the protagonist in *Minaret* whose “decisions all tend towards the consolidation or preservation of family rather than towards the individual fulfilment expected of a novelistic protagonist” (2018: 305).

All three characters mentioned here, the Scottish man in Khartoum, Ruqiyah, and Dina, look for something through religion. For the man it is connected with his failed medical school degree and finding new meaning; for Ruqiyah it is a way out of her abusive relationship with Gavin; and for Dina it promises a solution to her current unfulfilled life, but she remains uncertain which direction to take. Thus, religion and religious identity in the short stories are not about migration at all, but about personal choices, personal decisions for the future. Religious faith in the stories invites change and represents moving forward, and such mobility is not necessarily geographical. As News (2018: 286–287) observes, Aboulela seeks to “actively challenge readerly expectations of Muslims”. The characters dealing with their Muslim identities feel rootless not out of ethnic, national, or racial sentiments, but for reasons that have more to do with family contexts. Therefore, Aboulela manages to suggest a postmigrant condition in the making in these stories which seemingly emerge from rather conventional trajectories.

A brief look at one more of the more recent stories in the collection shows, however, a clear transition toward trajectories no longer as preoccupied with the margins or alienation caused by religious affiliation. “The Circle Line” offers to a greater degree than any of the other stories a glimpse of what postmigrant society might really mean. The main character defines London as “a city of generous absorption” (187). Migration and religion become a mere afterthought, not central to this story which celebrates “movement itself” (192) and a city simultaneously welcoming, diverse, and inclusive as well as remote, aloof, and isolating. London comes to manifest postmigrant society itself where the margins still exist in multiple layers and dimensions, but do not relate solely to migration.

There is thus an urgency to re-examine Aboulela’s writing from a perspective no longer only tied to being “a response to the needs of the second generation of Muslims who are not only trying to remain faithful to the principles of their religion, but are also very much rooted in the Western societies to which they belong” (Al-Karawi and Bahar, 2014: 257). Such a description of her writing, along with that of other writers who have negotiated the lives and realities of Muslims in the West in fiction, rests on notions of what Regina Römheld (2017: 70) has termed “migrantology”, which essentially is “research about migrants” instead of taking “migration as its perspective rather than its subject” (2017: 73). Foregrounding migration without reinforcing a “migrantological” approach is a challenge for the present analysis. I hope to have “explor[ed] how geographical mobility contributes to shape gendered religious identities” (Ryan and Vacchelli, 2013: 1), while also examining how religious identity itself, gendered or not, is geographically and socially mobile.

Defining postmigration as “a process of ongoing change” (Moslund and Petersen, 2019: 67) seems apt here. The characters in all of the stories are in the process of transitioning, sometimes creating new connections “across the migrant-native divide” (Petersen, 2019: 87) and sometimes remaining unable to overcome difficulties “in relation to minority status or marginalization and identity crises caused by cultural and racialized alienation” (Moslund, 2019: 95). Thus, postmigration emerges not only in the spaces where migration no longer occupies centre stage, but also in the deeply personal anxieties and fears about one’s place in society and position within the family. Postmigration as encompassing “sometimes conflictual and difficult [...] negotiation across cultural and political differences” (Moslund and Petersen, 2019: 73) is explicitly made manifest in the stories analysed here. Thus, my most important conclusion is that postmigrant identities and societies emerge in encounters between people but also in their conceptions and definitions of themselves as these notions come to define the interaction they have with others. Aboulela’s stories depict a society in the making, a society which is still in the process of becoming postmigrant, just like her characters who still struggle with their own becoming and moving toward whatever future trajectories they envision. Postmigration comes to mean an internal struggle to reconcile old views and new, longstanding traditions with novel expectations. The human desire to stay unchanged and unchallenged emerges not in the context of unwelcoming societies, but first and foremost in characters who wish to remain the same or to change profoundly and erase every trace of what and whom they used to be.

Conclusion

As my analysis has shown, postmigration relates not to a finished product but to a process. *Elsewhere, Home*, through its stories published over a period of 18 years, itself becomes evidence of this subtle transformation. However, it refuses to see any of its characters or their experiences as minor. The experience of being othered, forever or at least momentarily pushed to the margins, relates not only to migration in Aboulela’s collection, which has the word “elsewhere” even in its title. The elsewhere, however, comes to signify not just the origins of whomever is at the centre of a story, but also the elsewhere of where they have ended up, such as Aberdeen, London, or Khartoum, which are the settings of several of her stories. For characters such as Ruqiyah and the Scottish man who converted to Islam, being part of majority society through birth is complicated by their religious faith. However, religious identity is the perspective through which the stories are told, not the subject. This is in accordance with Römhild’s (2017) call for migration becoming the vantage point instead of always being the focal point for scrutiny.

Two of the stories briefly examined here, “Summer Maze” and “Pages of Fruit”, were published in 2017, and the others between 2000 and 2003 (Aboulela, 2018: 216). Both of these recent stories largely lack explicit religious undertones, whereas many of the previous ones deal explicitly with religious identities and complex individual choices, not unlike the difficult decisions and personal development Sammar and Najwa go through in *The Translator* and *Minaret*, respectively. These two recent stories additionally deal with motherly expectations, a theme also partly present in “Souvenirs” where Yassir’s mother struggles to accept her son’s Scottish wife. As the analysis in the previous sections shows,

there is little to suggest a “migrantology” at play. Although belonging is touched upon, particularly in relation to Nadia’s experiences, it is less a question of the migrant struggling to become part of majority society than of her finding and accepting her place in relation to her parents’, and thus her own, heritage as Egyptians. To the English couple by the Sphinx she is the local, just as Ronan K. the painter is described as being English despite having lived in Khartoum for 15 years. However, these issues are not foregrounded in the stories, which emphasize human interaction, human connection, and the differences in expectations and perspectives that are shared by minority and majority societies alike.

The postmigration society is also visible in terms of language. In “The Circle Line”, the female protagonist tells her date that she teaches Arabic: “‘I’m giving private Arabic lessons in the evenings,’ I say. ‘It’s amazing how many people now want to learn. And they’re willing to pay well for it!’” (185–86). Migration and so called migrant languages are becoming part of mainstream society, and the “emergent spaces of plurality” which Bromley refers to are certainly at play here. One of the characters in the stories who expresses an interest in learning better Arabic is Nadia. This character comes to embody the postmigrant condition perhaps more fully than many others due to her transitions between two cultures which are by no means effortless. Aboulela’s writing gives evidence of new forces in the making, of individual lives interacting and intersecting in increasingly transcultural societies. Movement may take place in terms of going forward, but it can also be “sideways, up, across” (143). Further study of fiction within a postmigration framework should hopefully shed light not only on factors contributing to personal identity, but on the relationship between time and space and their importance for postmigration. Movement as an inherent, inseparable part of postmigration in society calls for novel approaches to temporalities not only of migration and migrant identities but also of the pluralist spaces and encounters that are to be found in Aboulela’s stories.

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Note

1. Subsequent references are to this (2018) edition of Aboulela’s *Elsewhere, Home*, and will be cited parenthetically by page number in the text.

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