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Leila Aboulela's *Bird Summons*: Iman's Psycho-Spiritual Quest from Trauma to Wholeness

LINA SALEH
Salt Faculty of Human Sciences
Al-Balqa Applied University, Jordan
lina.saleh@bau.edu.jo

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the development of Iman's character in Leila Aboulela's Bird Summons and shows how she eventually achieves individuation in the British diaspora. The argument hinges upon two assumptions: Iman suffers from an identity crisis which arises from the Syrian Civil War and her three failed marriages, and she manages to overcome this crisis through a psycho-spiritual quest which heals her trauma and enables her to resume her life as a normal person. To achieve its goals, the study utilizes Sigmund Freud's psychological theories on traumatic neurosis, the seduction hypothesis, repression, and hysteria to prove that Aboulela portrays Iman as an unindividuated character whose divorce experience forces her to go through an abreaction of her repression and traumatized memory which used to impede the normal development of her personality formation. On the other hand, the article draws on Maureen Murdock's model of the female's psycho-spiritual quest. Murdock's eight-stage model functions as a therapeutic process that transforms the protagonist after she confronts her past. The study concludes that the outcome of Iman's psycho-spiritual quest results in the redemption of the split in her consciousness and unconsciousness caused by traumatic neurosis and in a reconciliation of the feminine and masculine sides of her character, which is needed to achieve wholeness. This identity reconstruction empowers Iman to prevail over war trauma, patriarchal dominance, and the cultural challenges in the British diaspora.

Keywords: Leila Aboulela; Sigmund Freud; Maureen Murdock; trauma; psycho-spiritual quest

INTRODUCTION

In the past two decades, the Sudanese writer Leila Aboulela has garnered a gradual yet increasing interest in her fiction. The wide critical acclaim she enjoys today manifests itself in the fact that she has been nominated for several literary awards and that her novels have been translated into fifteen languages. She has also been shortlisted for the prestigious Orange Prize for fiction three times. The awards she received include the Caine Prize for African Writing (2000), the Fiction Winner of the Scottish Book Awards (2011), and the Saltire Fiction Book of the Year Award (2018). *The Museum* (2001), *Lyrics Alley* (2010), and *Elsewhere, Home* (2018) have successively won the aforementioned prizes and officially established a worldwide recognition of Aboulela's talent. Aboulela's latest publications, *Bird Summons* (2020) and *River Spirit* (2023), have also received similar critical applause and appreciation due to their masterful storytelling style and captivating characterization.

As a Sudanese expatriate in the United Kingdom, Aboulela's personal experiences in the diaspora were highly inspirational. After pursuing her higher education in economics, she worked as a journalist and an editor before publishing her debut novel, *The Translator*, in 1999. The novel was a noteworthy fictional work inspired by her keen awareness of the cultural challenges she had to encounter as a female Muslim in a hybrid Western society. A scrutiny of her subsequent

publications shows that they tackle themes that centre on the intricacies of migration, cultural struggles, female diasporic identities, and the representation of Islam.

Aboulela has also earned recognition as a Muslim writer whose fictional concerns intersect with those of other diasporic female authors. In "Critical Spaces of Diaspora and the Shifting of Paradigm: Negotiating Intercultural Narratives in Arab Anglophone Literatures," Abu-Shomar (2020) defines diaspora as a "locus of enunciation" which "enables new epistemological outlets constructed through dialogic engagements, co-existence, [and] tolerance" where Aboulela, Ahdaf Souief, Fadia Faqir, Laila Lalami, Layla Halabi, Diana Abou Jaber "have established an innovative meaning of exilic consciousness mounting up as a productive identity crisis" (pp. 36-37). This stance is in tandem with Nash's (2017) belief that "a commonality within Anglophone Arab British women's fiction, whatever ideological spin is attached to it, is its frequent inscription of Arab migrant women's marginalization within British society. Soueif, Faqir, and Aboulela centre their plots on a displaced Arab woman" (p. 566). However, despite their cultural displacement, Aboulela's female characters are craftily individuated since they can emerge resiliently from the conflicts of their diasporic identity, preserve their cultural heritage, and grow through their Islamic faith.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since its publication in 2019, *Bird Summons* has received evident critical attention. The scholarship on Aboulela's novel focuses on issues related to the cultural challenges female Muslims encounter in Western societies. Different researchers have closely examined Aboulela's vivid portrayal of three female Arabs who struggle to integrate into the British community. Most of these researchers have discerned a premeditated relationship between Aboulela's thematic concerns and the narrative structure; moreover, they are inclined to examine Aboulela's female characters as trio travellers rather than three uniquely characterized women.

In "Mystical and Archetypal Journeys in Aboulela's *Bird Summons*," Saleh et al. (2023) explore the significance of the narrative structure of the novel and show that Aboulela artfully intertwines Sufi traditional structures with archetypal ones in order to provide a physical projection of the characters' spiritual quest. They conclude that the author's deliberate fusion of Islamic and Western journey structures attests to Aboulela's belief in the "universality of Islam and the possibility of religious tolerance and intercultural co-existence" (p.55).In this context, Kouta (2022) argues that Aboulela promotes her vision of interfaith dialogue within the discussion of cosmopolitanism by skillfully using magical realism to underscore the cross-cutting issues in Islam and Christianity (p.34). The uncanny events in the novel take the characters to the Medieval Era to emphasize certain faith commonalities between the now conflicting religions. This indicates that Aboulela's employment of narrative structure and storytelling techniques greatly serves her main fictional concerns.

Similarly, Aladylah's (2023) approach to *Bird Summons* illuminates the connection between diasporic narratives and diasporic identities. According to him, diasporic narratives oscillate "between exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, belonging and rejection" in order to replicate the diasporic identities, which "mutate and change through transition, travelling between multiple spiral spaces and experiencing transformational change" (p.211). Thus, he describes *Bird Summons* as "a pastiche novel, a massive *tour de force*, a magic portrait of three fictional excavators, who embark on a religious and cultural journey of self-discovery and transformation" (p.214).

Although religion is a significant aspect of the novel, some critics were inclined to interpret the protagonists' physical movement from the city to the forest and their transformation within the framework of psychology rather than spirituality. In "Psychogeography, Nostalgia and Heroic Metamorphosis in Leila Aboulela's *Bird Summons*," Raslan (2023) grapples with Catherina Loffler's literary psychogeography to fathom the underlying meaning of the protagonists' voyage to the grave of Lady Evelyn Cobbold. The trio travellers'adventurous trip to the Scottish Highlands reveals the three women's psychological anxieties, latent desires and dreams, and keen sense of nostalgia, which led El Sayed Raslan (2023) to believe that the novel is "a perfect example of literary psychogeography in which walking is at the centre of the narrative" (p. 367). The protagonists' physical movement in the forest entails "physical metamorphosis" and "heroic transformation," after which they achieve "self-actualization" (p. 366).

The current study fills a gap in the previous scholarship on Aboulela's *Bird Summons* since it departs from the commonly tackled issues related to the cultural and structural aspects of the novel. While some of the previous studies focused on the identity construction of Arab diasporic females within the framework of Islamic spirituality, this article zooms in on the text to closely investigate the psychological depths of Aboulela's representation of Iman's trauma. Instead of evaluating the trio of female travellers in the novel as a group, this study offers a critical appreciation of Aboulela's skilful portrayal of Iman as a separate character with distinctive psychological features. Hence, this approach explores a different facet of Aboulela's talent, which goes beyond Islamic spirituality and East/West cultural encounters.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study uses a psychological approach to analyze the character of one of the female protagonists in Aboulela's novel, *Bird Summons.* It employs Sigmund Freud's theories on traumatic neurosis, seduction hypothesis, repression, and hysteria to show that war and marriage traumas impede the normal individuation of the character. On the other hand, the study adopts Maureen Murdock's eight-stage model of the female's psycho-spiritual quest, which leads to achieving individuation and wholeness in order to analyze how the character manages to overcome trauma and to proceed in her life as a normal person.

FREUDIAN TRAUMATIC NEUROSIS

Sigmund Freud's (1856-1939) exploration of traumatic neurosis laid the foundation for trauma theories in the twentieth century, especially what came to be known as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Freud's theories emphasized the significance of unconscious processes and the role of childhood experiences in the individual's response to shocking experiences. In his psychological studies, traumatic neurosis refers to a complex condition which he associates with a wide array of psychological issues, including the seduction hypothesis, traumatic memories, repression, and hysteria. In *Studies on Hysteria*, Breuer et al., (1895) propose that "[a]ny experience which calls up distressing effects -such as those of fright, anxiety, shame or physical pain- may operate as a trauma" (p. 6). Thus, trauma arises from any unpleasant experience which entails physical or psychological injury. Breuer et al., (1895) believe that the negative impact of trauma on the individual becomes manifest in the form of neurotic symptoms and hysterical attacks, which indicate that the patient is reliving the event through the intrusive memories which he fails to repress.

As a pioneer trauma theorist, Freud's insights on how shocking experiences could disrupt the normal functioning of the human psyche still matter today. In *Studies on Hysteria*, Breuer et al., (1895) focused mainly on the meaning of trauma and how repressing traumatic memories influences the adult life of the patient. In the seduction hypothesis, he associates adult neurotic behaviour and repression with childhood sexual experiences. Freud's subsequent studies developed a more accurate and comprehensive definition of traumatic neurosis; his constant revisions of his trauma theories yielded an expansion rather than a refutation of his previous studies. In "Freud's Three Theories of Neurosis: Towards a Contemporary Theory of Trauma," Sletvold (2016) asserts that "Freud remains convinced that 'no neurosis is possible with a normal *vita sexualis*' and starts instead to develop a view that places decisive aetiological weight on the sexual constitution" (p. 465). Freud's further thinking of the aetiology of neuroses led him to explore other causes for it. In *Introduction to Psycho-Analysis and the War Neuroses,* Freud (1971c) clarifies that traumatic memories may include different kinds of shocking experiences such as war, severe accidents, or sexual abuse; however, "the war neuroses are only traumatic neuroses, which, as we know, occur in peace-time too after frightening experiences or severe accidents, without any reference to a conflict in the ego" (Freud, p. 209).

According to Freud (1971a), the seduction hypothesis comprises three main phases. The first phase takes place during the childhood of the sexually immature victim who is seduced by either an adult or another child, and because of his incapability of assimilating the experience, he stores it as part of his "unconscious memories" (p. 211). Freud (1971b) argues that such seduction experiences do not act traumatically; adult neurotic trauma is the result of "their later revival as a memory after the subject has entered sexual maturity" (p.164). Hence, the arousal of childhood traumatic memories after puberty is usually mixed with shame, self-reproach, and self-distrust; the victim represses the intrusive memories and the negative feelings associated with them (Freud, 1971b, p.169).

In the light of Freud's suppressed seduction theory, which examines traumatic memories rather than instinctual impulses, repression can be defined as "[t]he mind's active attempt to prevent memories of traumatic experiences from reaching conscious awareness" (Martin et al., 2017, p.600). Freud (1937) proposes that repression has three basic phases: primary repression, secondary repression, and the return of the repressed. Primary repression refers to the phase when the individual goes through the formation of a nucleus of unconscious ideas as a result of a shocking and traumatizing experience. The second phase is secondary repression, which refers to the different mental derivatives of the main repressed material or anything connected with it that the patient strives to avoid. Avoidance is a defence mechanism which victims of trauma use to fend off any stimuli which trigger painful memories. When traumatic experiences overwhelm the individual due to the intensity of emotional distress, they impede the patient's ability to cope, and he goes through the final phase of repression. In this phase, the traumatized person experiences a failure of repression, which results in the return of the repressed and, consequently, traumatic neurosis (Freud, 1937). In *Splitting of the Ego in the Process of Defence,* Freud (1971d) elaborates on the dynamics of repression and explains how external factors interfere in repression, which "can almost never be achieved without the additional help of upbringing, of parental influence which restricts the ego's activity by prohibitions and punishments, and encourages or compels the setting-up of repression" (p.185). Accordingly, Freud believes that parental behaviour towards their child's infantile trauma can either mitigate or perpetuate its influence on the individual.

The causal connection between a present event and a past repressed memory renders the trauma operative in the consciousness of the traumatized person. In "Freud's Approach to Trauma," Bulut (2019) explains that according to Freud, "all hysterical symptoms were caused by childhood sexual 'abuse or molestation' which left unconscious memories; and later during adolescence when exposed to situations that reminiscent the original trauma, those memories were activated" (p. 1). If the patient suppresses the memory, the effect associated with the traumatic experience remains in the unconscious. However, the failure of repression causes a split in consciousness and may result in traumatic hysteria, which is manifested in the actions and utterances of the patient. Breuer and Freud (1956) explain the pathological symptoms of hysteria, which take the form of attacks, chronic symptoms, or "a mixture of the two" (p. 17). In a hysterical attack, the patient suffers from repetitive hallucinations, chronic vomiting and anorexia, various forms of disturbance of vision, and other physical symptoms (Breuer & Freud, 1956, p. 4). These physical symptoms are pathological signs which indicate the patient's inability to control the traumatized memory. Breuer and Freud (1956) opine that hysteria is curable if the hysteric individual goes through a certain process to overcome it; they illustrate that the ability of the patient to articulate the emotions associated with the return of repressed traumatic memories is crucial in treatment because "[r]ecollection without affect almost invariably produces no result" (p. 6). Healing from the symptoms of hysteria takes the following stages:

> *each individual hysterical symptom immediately and permanently disappeared when we had succeeded in bringing clearly to light the memory of the event by which it was provoked and in arousing its accompanying effect and when the patient had described that event in the greatest possible detail and had put the effect into words*… The physical process which originally took place must be repeated as vividly as possible; it must be brought back to its *status nascendi* and then given verbal utterance.
>
> (Breuer & Freud, 1956, p. 6, italics in original)

When the patient recollects the traumatic event and has the ability to express the emotions associated with it, he overreacts to the effect and causes its disappearance from the unconscious. By abreaction, Breuer and Freud (1956) mean the voluntary and involuntary reflexes which can range "from tears to acts of revenge" (p. 8). If the repressed memory is adequately abreacted, it has a cathartic effect on the hysteric personality (Breuer & Freud, 1956, p. 8). Thus, recollection and the proper repetitive articulation of trauma liberate the patient from repression and hysteria, and he becomes a normal person.

In "Trauma and Traumatic Neurosis: Freud's Concepts Revisited," Zepf, S., & Zepf, F. D. (2008) investigate Freud's concepts of trauma and the dynamics of traumatic neurosis in the light of recent findings. They argue that "the only option that remains to master destructive traumas is for the individual to leave the scenic figures in which the trauma presents itself on the level of hallucinatory wish-fulfilment at the time when he moves back to the phase where the trauma set in" (341). The traumatized individual abandons the reality which triggers unpleasant memories by resorting to hallucinations which soothe the pain. However, this abandonment is temporary because "it is this unconscious situation that urges the victim to turn back to reality in order to master his trauma" (Zepf, S., & Zepf, F. D., 2008, p. 341). Mastering destructive trauma rehabilitates the individual so that he can lead a normal life.

In her book *The Heroine's Journey: Woman's Quest for Wholeness*, Murdock (1990) provides a female version of the "hero's journey" and calls it the "heroine's journey" because, according to her, Joseph Campbell's (1949) original model overlooks the "psycho-spiritual aspect of the female's journey" (Murdock, 1990, p.2) towards individuation. Murdock (1990) proposes a cycle of eight stages for the female protagonist to achieve what she calls "Wholeness." The eight stages fall into three main phases: The Separation, The Descent, and The Rebirth. The Separation consists of two stages: "Separation from the Feminine" and "Identification with the Masculine." At this point, the heroine departs from the mother archetype, which stands for the feminine roles prescribed by patriarchal society (Murdock, 1990, p. 14). Consequently, the journey begins with breaking away from feminine ideals and turning towards patriarchal values by identifying with the metaphorical father. The next stage is the Descent, which incorporates the "Road of Trials," "Finding the Illusory Boon of Success," "Awakening Feelings of Spiritual Aridity," and "Initiation and Descent to the Goddess."Similar to the hero's journey, the heroine in Murdock's model goes on a "Road of Trials" and faces obstacles which lead to character development towards personality formation. Eventually, the heroine achieves success and empowerment. These obstacles are the embodiment of "the forces of her own self-doubt, self-hate, indecisiveness, paralysis, and fear" (Murdock, 1990, p. 48). Venturing into the unknown in search of wholeness signifies delving deeply into the heroine's psyche in order to make the character development possible. By overcoming obstacles, the female character experiences an "Illusory Boon of Success," which stands for awakening and rebirth.

The Rebirth, the third and final stage of the heroine's journey, combines the "Urgent Yearning to Reconnect with the Feminine," "Healing the Mother Daughter Split," "Healing the Wounded Masculine" and finally the "Integration of Masculine and Feminine." At this point, the heroine reconciles with her femininity as she understands that it is not the cause of her feelings of inferiority but rather her society's condemnation of her sex. This process involves "a redefinition and validation of feminine values and an integration of these with masculine skills learned during the first half of the journey" (Murdock, 1990, p. 4). To close the cycle of the journey, Murdock (1990) maintains that:

> The heroine must become a spiritual warrior. ... She must not discard nor give up what she has learned throughout her heroic quest but learn to view her hard-earned skills and success not so much as a *goal* but as one part of the entire journey. She will begin to use these skills to work toward the larger quest of bringing people together rather than her own individual gain.
>
> (p. 11, italics in original)

This leads to the final stage which is "Union" in which the heroine overcomes the male/female split within her and embraces both sides of her identity. Subsequently, she manages to keep a balance between the feminine side and the masculine side and to achieve "Wholeness."

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

IMAN'S TRAUMATIC NEUROSIS

In *Bird Summons,* Aboulela traces the spiritual journey of three Arab women in Britain to the grave of Lady Evelyn Cobbold. Though the three of them share the need to reconnect with their spirituality and Islamic faith to rejuvenate their personal life and to find inspiration to better integrate into the British community, Aboulela purposefully distinguishes each one of them in terms of background and personality. Aboulela introduces the character of Iman to the reader as a young Syrian wife of Kurdish origins who lives in Britain with her third husband, Ibrahim. Iman is in her early twenties and has been widowed and divorced; however, Aboulela gives several indicators that she lacks the proper individuation of a grown-up woman. She has always been surrounded by possessive people who controlled her and made important life decisions on her behalf. This applies to her strict parents, her three possessive husbands, and even her friend, Salma, who treated her like a pet. They all represent the patriarchal society which dominates Iman's life and choices. Despite her exquisite beauty, which made men "smell her from afar" (Aboulela, 2020, p. 4), she felt that she was leading an existence "without feelings or desires-nothing to complain or brag about" (Aboulela, 2020, p. 12). The omniscient narrator emphasizes her voidness by saying that "[t]here was little that Iman was qualified for" (Aboulela, 2020, p. 9), her "English was poor" (Aboulela, 2020, p.20), and her "lack of confidence made it difficult for her to argue" (Aboulela, 2020, p. 31). Iman's immaturity becomes manifest in her lack of self-esteem and her poor command of language, which prevent her from articulating her own opinions.

The roots of Iman's traumatic neurosis stem from the dire repercussions of the Syrian Civil War on her personal life and the normal development of her self-formation. The war is responsible for the extreme destitution of her family; thus, Iman experiences "a wide spectrum of poverty, from scrambling for the next meal to ultra-careful rationing to tremendous efforts to keep up appearances" (Aboulela, 2020, p.31). War conditions also prevented her from pursuing her studies, which could have qualified her for a rewarding job that ensured financial independence. Her "zero qualifications" (Aboulela, 2020, p.73) foster a keen sense of inferiority and insecurity in her character. The narrator comments:

> [w]hen the war started, she was the wrong age: too young to assume responsibility and too old to receive the precious, precious care reserved for children. She was in the way: unnecessary. Only her beauty was valuable. Hence the marrying off, hence the flight out of the country [sic]. If you were useful and necessary to your people, you would not leave all that and become a refugee.
>
> (Aboulela, 2020, p. 68)

Iman's first marriage takes place at an early age when she is not sexually mature. Losing her husband during the first uprising against Assad forces her to choose another husband who could take her abroad to escape from the Civil War. In Britain, she divorces her second husband, who gets imprisoned, and her family warns her "[d]o anything but don't come back. … Because of the war, the home was neither safe nor prosperous. Those who were lucky to be out stayed out" (Aboulela, 2020, p.34). Taking heed of her family's advice, she approves of Ibrahim's religious and paperless marriage, which is not recognized by British law.

Iman's first marriage experience at the age of fifteen can be considered an act of seduction rather than a normal marital relationship during which she develops primal repression. Marriage as a form of prostitution recurs as a leitmotif in the novel, where Iman frequently reflects on this unusual thought and debates it with her friends; she wonders, "[t]o what extent is marriage

religiously sanctioned prostitution?" she elaborates "[p]rostitution and marriage. Man pays and woman serves. He houses, clothes and feeds her to get something in return. So what was the difference between the two?" (Aboulela, 2020, pp.34-35). Aboulela craftily details how Iman came to repress her first sexual experience as a traumatic relationship, which fosters a repressed memory of marriage as prostitution. The poor parents arrange a hasty marriage for their young and innocent daughter because they could not support their big family during the war. One day, upon her arrival from school, Iman's mother rushes her to change in order to meet her groom. Her mother talks to her in a voice which means "no negotiation" would be allowed, and she chooses a dress that Iman "didn't particularly like" (Aboulela, 2020, p.19). This incident is one of the most important repressed memories in Iman's unconscious. Marrying an older person of her parent's choice traumatizes Iman sexually; as a result, she stores this marriage as an unpleasant experience, which distorts this human relationship in her psyche. Her sexual trauma manifests itself in Iman's belief that marriage is sanctioned prostitution rather than holy matrimony between man and woman.

Iman's deceivingly stable marriage to Ibrahim functions as a safety valve to all her repressed memories; however, Ibrahim suddenly removes this valve when he decides to divorce her to please his parents. During their marriage, she successfully manages to practice defensive repression of the memories of war and previous unhappy marriages. Even though she marries him to rescue her from homelessness in a foreign country, she finds herself "loving him as a friend, someone she could cuddle on the sofa and play games with on the PlayStation" (Aboulela, 2020, p.34). For the first time, Iman gets married to someone who is close to her age, and this gives her the feeling that "his immaturity was endearing, his consistent lust for her reassuring" (Aboulela, 2020, p.34). This gratification mitigates Ibrahim's possessive behaviour and helps Iman to cope temporarily with her trauma.

Ibrahim's later insistence on abandoning Iman is the stimulus which returns the repressed memories of rejection and abandonment; she remembers her family, "[n]one of them wanted her back. For her own good, of course. But still, it felt, at times, like a rejection. She wanted them to say the opposite: come back, we need you, we miss you" (Aboulela, 2020, p.52). The war trauma changed everything for Iman. It even "made her despise her elders" (Aboulela, 2020, p.68). This parental interference in Iman's choices restricts the ego's activity by prohibition and accentuates her trauma. The war atrocities Iman experienced in the past compel her to comply with her family's orders to stay abroad and start a new life there, contrary to her wish to be reunited with them. Thus, the compulsive memories of the war and her homeland overwhelm Iman, who "did not want the flickering images of the past" to poison her present; she wards these memories off and thinks, "[w]ar should stay out of here" (Aboulela, 2020, p.68). Iman's failure of repression is manifested in the recurring images of the atrocities of war. They mercilessly force her to remember horrific details such as "shaking windows, wailing women, burnt skin…blood…[and] death" (Aboulela, 2020, pp.68-69). Reliving these traumatic events through vivid memories increases Iman's irritability and sense of anxiety, which significantly affect her life and relationships.

When at first Iman fails in repressing these memories, she suffers from symptoms of traumatic neurosis and acts in a hysterical way, which alarms her friends. Her wild actions are associated with her temporary rejection of her Islamic outfit because it restricts her freedom. They also stem from her resentment of her femininity because it covers her soul. Hence, Iman gets rid of her *hijab,* and she once ventures into the forest totally naked to free herself from any clothes that define her identity. She also cuts her hair very short because it symbolizes her feminine beauty, which used to distract people from her other qualities. Despite Iman's hysterical behaviour, which the sudden divorce provokes, she abreacts to the return of repressed memories by repeating the

action related to the first forced marriage, i.e., choosing and changing costumes. This act stands for Iman's wish to defy the autonomy of her mother by picking her own clothes. Additionally, Aboulela symbolically projects Iman's latent desire to overcome her trauma in the palm tree the protagonist grows to indicate her wish to endure and grow. Iman plants a "date seed" (Aboulela, 2020, p.52), and she waters it with her tears, hoping that a miracle will make it grow despite the cold weather. Tears perform a therapeutic abreaction to Iman's trauma. Accordingly, the recurring images of germination and growth are symbolic of her own self-formation. Like the palm tree planted in the cold climate of Britain, Iman strives to reconstruct her identity in the diaspora.

In *Bird Summons*, the Hoopoe plays a major role in Iman's healing process from trauma. The bird's spiritual value stems from the fact that it is mentioned in the Holy Quran, and it is always associated with wisdom. His appearance to Iman, in particular, reflects her urgent need for spiritual guidance and moral support in order to inspire her transformation. Thus, Aboulela intertwines Iman's physical journey to Lady Evelyn Cobbold's grave with a spiritual and inspirational one. Honouring Lady Evelyn Cobbold, the first British woman to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca, educates Iman about the history of Islam in Britain and helps her to integrate better into British society. On the other hand, Iman also heals through the educational stories of the Hoopoe, who enlightens her about different aspects of life. He plays the role of the therapist since he helps the protagonist come to terms with her repressed feelings through the indirect evacuation of her unconscious. Her several encounters with the Hoopoe and his symbolic stories function as the hypnotic procedures of the psychiatrist who intentionally reduces the awareness of the patient to render him more receptive to new ideas and perspectives. The Hoopoe repeatedly immerses Iman in stimulating tales to broaden her horizons and to motivate her growth.

Aboulela perceptively captures the relationship between clothes, identity, and marriage in the Hoopoe's story about the fisherman and the selkie. The Hoopoe tells Iman how the lustful fisherman deceives the beautiful selkie into remaining on land and marrying him. He hides her sealskin in the attic for years in order to prevent her from assuming her seal shape and going back to water where she belongs. Stuck in her human shape, she marries him and starts a family. After years of marriage, the selkie discovers her husband's scheme and their confrontation results in a disaster; he throws the sealskin in the fire, attempting to force her to stay with him, but the selkie throws herself in the fire to rescue her skin. After this incident, "the fisherman no longer had a beautiful wife. Instead, he had a bitter, ugly presence in his home, one that forever wished him ill and brought him bad luck" (Aboulela, 2020, p.91). The moral that the Hoopoe wants to pass to Iman is quite clear: A happy marriage is not based on beauty, lust, and children. You will always feel "out of place" (Aboulela, 2020, p.91) if you lack identity and independence. The selkie's sealskin, which represents an important part of this creature's identity, remains hidden in the attic for years because of a marriage based on lust. The Hoopoe presents this cautionary model for Iman to urge her to search for her identity in the attic she secludes herself in after her last divorce. He helps her to adopt and internalize new values about marriage and human relations; wifehood and motherhood should not subordinate her identity as an autonomous human being.

IMAN'SJOURNEYTO MURDOCK'SWHOLENESS

Iman's third childless divorce performs a wake-up call which compels her to discover her real identity and redefine her selfhood. The divorce shakes her sense of complacency regarding the ability of her beauty to guarantee a happy marital relationship. Accordingly, her reevaluation of her attractive feminine attributes leads her to believe that her physical beauty has become a burden since it defines her and distracts others from her real identity; "Beauty itself was a mask, a barrier,

all that other people could see of her" (Aboulela, 2020, p. 191). At one point, she thinks that "her human shape itself had been a costume" (Aboulela, 2020, p. 233), which hides her actual identity and confines her freedom. She atones for the anxiety of this realization once by fantasizing about being an inanimate object or an animal which does not need a home and once by roaming in the forest naked to free herself from the restrictions of her inherited *hijab*.

In a cycle of eight stages, Iman manages to eventually achieve Murdock's wholeness. Aboulela projects Iman's character transformations through the different costumes she chooses to wear from the magical cupboard she finds in the attic. The divorce takes her back to the moment which impeded her normal individuation, i.e. when her mother chooses a dress for her and decides to marry her off. The several outfits she tries on represent a recollection and a repetition of the repressed memory of her first marriage. Iman decides to stay in the attic away from Salma and Mona because this solitude allows her to clear her mind and think about her future. Reflecting on her inherited Islamic style and her previous adherence to patriarchal social expectations regarding clothes draws Iman's attention to the external and internal restrictions on her individuality as a female. Iman expresses her awareness of the connection between clothes and identity as she says:

> Every day since we've been here, I wear a different outfit, and I become someone else. Every costume has a story and comes with a way of behaving attached to it. Suppose it's pretty and feminine or practical. Some of the clothes in the cupboard here are heavy, and some of them are restrictive. They made me think about my own clothes. Why do I dress the way I do? That's how my mother and the women in my village dress. Or that's how my husband of the time wanted me to dress.
>
> (Aboulela, 2020, pp. 182-183)

The repetitive act of changing clothes and questioning paternal and social rules represents Iman's active reaction against the effect associated with the repressed memory. The transition of her outfits from feminine costumes to masculine and more practical ones attests to her gradual character growth. With each costume she puts on, Iman assumes a new role and conquers a new border in her development towards Murdock's wholeness. The varied roles and outfits allow her to explore the latent dimensions of her individuality.

In the first stage of Iman's identity crisis, the magic cupboard yields the costumes which conform to the "mother archetype" or the traditional gender roles of a woman: "A nurse, a witch, a kimono, Batgirl complete with cape and mask and, best of all, a princess" (Aboulela, 2020, p. 64); she tries out costumes like the Cleopatra dress, the witch costume, and the Cinderella costume. Iman's pressing need to shed the shackles of patriarchal dominance and to achieve independence manifests itself in the magic cupboards' offering of masculine costumes; "whereas on her arrival, there was an abundance of princess dresses, flouncy skirts and beautiful colours, a more pragmatic mood was now on offer. There was a sailor outfit, a nurse, even an astronaut!" (Aboulela, 2020, p. 141). Murdock states that "a woman wishes to identify with the masculine or to be rescued by the masculine; when a woman decides to break with the established images of the feminine, she inevitably begins the traditional hero's journey" (Murdock, 1990, p. 36). Assuming masculine roles represents the threshold for the female's character growth where she tries to transcend the limitations of her gender by identifying with the masculine.

The next stage of the heroine's journey is the female character's "Descent." Iman goes on a "Road of Trials" and faces obstacles that lead to character development, success, and empowerment. Murdock defines the road of trials as "Confronting Ogres and Dragons …[in which the heroine] leaves the safety of her parent's home, and goes in search of herself [and]…. she is alone at night metaphorically, wandering the road of trials to discover her strengths and abilities and uncover and overcome her weaknesses" (Murdock, 1990, p. 46). Iman goes through different

obstacles in the forest as she ultimately complains that "[e]ven here, there could be fighters, snipers, violence" (Aboulela, 2020, p.145). In the forest, a sniper and a dog attack her. Wearing the costume of Padme Amidala who is a queen warrior, Iman protects the forest and its people against the sniper. With a "weapon in her hand, she was able to fight" (Aboulela, 2020, p.167). The weapon stands for a masculine sign of power. In this incident, Aboulela portrays Iman as a soldier and a leader who counters her previous image as a weak and helpless wife. By successfully overcoming this challenge, Iman experiences an "Illusory Boon of Success," which is gaining knowledge. She achieves this knowledge at the monastery, which she describes as being "too masculine" (Aboulela, 2020, p. 142); this clearly indicates that the character's access to knowledge is linked to her identification with masculinity through assuming male tasks and entering masculine domains.

The next stage in Murdock's journey is the female's reconciliation with her feminine side. In the novel, Iman feels that the feminine and masculine sides are competing in her as she explains how "[e]ver since the dog had knocked her down and the earth had hugged her, she had experienced this duality. It was almost as if she had to be weakened to gain strength; she had to stimulate dying to throb full of life" (Aboulela, 2020, p. 167). Iman's conscious character growth progresses to a stage where she cautiously yearns for her femininity; she feels ready to reconnect with her feminine side, yet she is very keen on preserving her newly acquired knowledge and power. Later in the novel, the narrator declares that Iman's "revulsion against being feminine or even human, all melted away. Iman had grown up. She wore maturity like a cape, and it was the best piece of clothing she had never put on" (Aboulela, 2020, p. 261).

By the same token, the heroine's journey involves "Reconciliation with the Masculine." Iman continues to appreciate her masculine side, which empowers her as a female and frees her from emotional and financial dependency on others. She realizes that "[i]t had not been about the hijab covering her femininity after all, but it was about her femininity covering her human soul" (Aboulela, 2020, p. 234). Exploring her masculine side and trying to reach beyond her overwhelming femininity opens new horizons for her. Eventually, Iman achieves "Union" or "Wholeness" by maintaining a balance between her feminine side and her masculine one. Towards the end of the novel, Iman reaches the important conclusion that "[s]he could be herself without hating her femininity she had been born with" (Aboulela, 2020, p. 283); reconciling her feminine and masculine sides, Iman contently embraces the positive development of her identity and looks forward to a more independent future.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, tracing the identity development of the female characters in Leila Aboulela's *Bird Summons* offers various insights into the intricacies of diasporic experiences, the universality of spiritual quests, and the potentiality of intercultural understanding and co-existence. This study contributes to the broader discourse on these issues by expanding the dimensions of criticism usually associated with Aboulela's female characters since it focuses on the impact of trauma on individuation. It fills a lacuna in the scholarship on *Bird Summons* since it closely investigates the distinctive characterization of Iman apart from her fellow travellers. Unlike her two mature friends, she is portrayed as a young, traumatized girl whose individuation is hindered by war trauma and three unhappy childless marriages. Combining Freud's psychological theories on traumatic neurosis with Murdock's model of the female's psycho-spiritual quest to achieve wholeness opens

Aboulela's text to new interpretations and treads previously untrodden territories of her artistic creativity in this novel. While Freudian concepts precisely diagnose Iman's identity crisis and hysterical symptoms, Murdock's eight-stage model perfectly applies to Iman's gradual healing process and steady growth towards successful individuation, self-esteem, and independence.

Exploring the intriguing depths of Iman's psyche illuminates the multilayered quality of Aboulela's narrative and the diversity of her characterization of female Muslims who heroically and uniquely manage to prevail over the challenges of diaspora. Further research could be conducted on the psychological complexity of the other female characters in the novel in order to examine Aboulela's profound characterization, which is not confined to cultural and spiritual representations. Themes of isolation, search for autonomy, and maternal anxiety are manifested in the troubled psyches of Iman's friends. Accordingly, utilizing psychological and feminist approaches to fathom the depths of Aboulela's characterization could yield interesting interpretations in terms of the females' identity crises, gender roles, and feminine agency. In *Bird Summons*, Aboulela challenges the stereotypical representation of Muslim women and explores different aspects of their diasporic experience in Britain. Thus, one of Aboulela's notable accomplishments in this novel stems from her ability to maintain a profound level of distinctiveness for each character despite their apparent unity regarding the spiritual journey to the grave of Lady Evelyn Cobbold.

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