

# Mimicry as a Positive Strategy: A Cultural Study of Leila Aboulela's Lyrics Alley

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The struggle between Western ideology and Eastern thoughts on all levels has generated a lot of consequences which are considered as a sign of postcolonialism. Imitation is one of those catastrophic consequences of colonialism which has a negative impact on colonized objects. However, this article argues that applying Homi Bhabha's concept of "mimicry" to Leila Aboulela's Lyrics Alley proves a positive impact of imitation within the context of postcolonial theory. Moreover, the article aims at showing the bright side of "mimicry" for being a process of improvement of the personality. The article, on the other hand, makes scholars aware of the fact that imitation has not always been a negative impact. To be more specific, Aboulela's characters imitate the Western style of living to gain some profits out of such imitation (i.e. imitation for them can be seen as a strategy to earn their living and a path for modernity).

**Key words:** *Enlightenment, Hybrid, Mimicry, Postcolonialism.*

## Introduction

In spite of all the setbacks that have been generated by colonialism and the negative aftermaths of such a period, colonized societies have their share of some positive aspects that have risen out of colonialism. The ongoing will to be a replica of Western culture drives colonized man to imitate the colonizer hoping to find a foothold in Western societies. In other words, most of the colonized people are lured by the pseudo project of colonialism which compels them to espouse two or more different cultures. Such adoption of cultures has made them torn between different loyalties. However, this convoluted relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, paves the way for the latter to copy and paste some of the norms and style of living of the colonizer.



The issue of imitation has received a lot of attention from many critics and scholars who affirm, that imitation as a process, generates hybrid identities. That is to say, the desire of colonized man to embrace two cultures simultaneously has induced him to live as with a hybrid character. In a similar vein, Frantz Fanon in his book "Black Skin, White Masks" argues that the colonized man in his attempts "to elevate himself to the white man's level" (p. 60) is fully aware that "he is constructed not as a real person with real history but an image" (ibid xiv). In other words, Fanon holds that imitation causes self-destruction for whoever experiences such away.

However, Homi Bhabha believes that imitation or as he calls "mimicry" can be considered as a positive mean to boost personality. He posits that mimicry is the tool that leads to modernity. In his outstanding essay "Of Mimicry and Man", Bhabha argues that mimicry "is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other" (p. 86). To Bhabha, mimicry "is at once resemblance and menace" (ibid) in that the colonized man can be at least "a partial vision of the colonizer's presence" (ibid 88) on the one hand. The colonized man in his mastery of some of the norms and values of the colonizer may form a real threat to the authority of the colonizer.

Undoubtedly, Leila Aboulela in her novel "Lyrics Alley" written in 2010 embodies the burdens of living between two spaces and the way that such an experience generates hybrid characters on the one hand. Her pen reflects the non-stop suffering in her journey between the ancestor's land of Sudan and the new land of Egypt. On the other hand, in Lyrics Alley, Aboulela foregrounds how her characters are in a continuous endeavour to develop a strategy to earn their living in a postcolonial world. They imitate Westerners to carve a niche in the foreign world in an attempt to gain personal benefit. Thus, she brings together the positive and negative consequences of colonialism in her novel.

## **Discussion**

At the outset, it is noteworthy to mention that Aboulela's Lyrics Alley is one of the contemporary novels that sheds light on the issue of mimicry and the formation of hybrid characters. The hybrid nature of Aboulela herself being a citizen of two countries, Sudan & Egypt, has its impact on her writings. In a similar vein, Aboulela in an interview states that:

When I was growing up, we spoke Egyptian, we ate Egyptian food, we had other Egyptian friends. It was my father's preference. I think he saw marrying an Egyptian as being liberating from the customs of his day...I think marrying an Egyptian was a compromise. My mum and dad were speaking all the time about 'in Sudan we do this' and 'in Egypt we do that' so I was very aware of cultural differences.



In Lyrics Alley Aboulela tackles a lot of issues concerning the effect of cultural differences on her characters in order to show the positive side of such differences. Mimicry is one of those issues that Aboulela traces in her novel to mirror the bright side of the enlightenment of the postcolonial project. A great number of scholars and theorists have levelled criticism against the phenomenon of mimicry and consider it as a way of destruction of the self. By the same token, Frantz Fanon in his influential book "Black Skin, White Masks" argues that imitation is just a lie because the colonized man "betrays himself by his speech" (13). That is, he is aware of the fact that imitation cannot make him "climbs up towards whiteness and light" (ibid 165). In other words, Fanon believes that non-West cannot be elevated to the level of the West by using their tools because those non-West "have their own drama" (ibid xv). To be more specific, Fanon asserts that imitation cannot lead to a serious change for those whom he calls non-West because "western history...also writes off the history of the non-West" (ibid). That is to say colonized man, whether he imitates the Western man or not, already has his destiny determined by the Western ideology (Sandra, and Vidya, 2018).

In a similar vein, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her book "A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward A History of The Vanishing Present" holds that "imitation of the West in every aspect of life, for then the very distinction between the West and East would vanish-the self-identity of national culture would itself be threatened" (61). Spivak, therefore, is familiar with the catastrophic consequences of imitation since such a phenomenon may endanger a split identity and may weaken the national identity.

In contrast with what was previously said about the dark side of imitation, Homi Bhabha argues that imitation or "mimicry" forms a threat for the colonial project since it weakens its authority on the colonized. Bhabha posits that mimicry "is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other" (86). That is to say, mimicry supplies the colonized man with self-confidence to build up his identity and to boost the self to gain some superiority. Bhabha writes in his famous essay "Of Mimicry and Man" that "[t]he menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority. And it is a double vision that is a result of what I've described as the partial representation / recognition of the colonial object (98).

Arguably, Bhabha vividly shows that mimicry can be seen as a partial representation of the colonizer in which the colonized object will be seen as "almost the same but not quite" (99). Bhabha holds that the colonized object can acquire some positive aspects through the imitation of the superior object and can form a serious threat to the colonial project. In other words, Bhabha draws upon the idea that there is a "difference between being English and being Anglicized" (ibid 89\_90) to show that the colonized cannot be a replica of the colonizer because "[m]imicry repeats rather than re-presents" (ibid 88). In her ground breaking book



“Postcolonial Theory: An Introduction”, Leela Gandhi refers to the term "mimicry" in the following words:

But 'mimicry' is also the sly weapon of anti-colonial civility, an ambivalent mixture of deference and disobedience. The native subject often appears to observe the political and semantic imperatives of colonial discourse. But at the same time, she systematically misrepresents the foundational assumptions of this discourse by articulating it...In effect, then, mimicry inheres in the necessary and multiple acts of translation which oversee the passage from colonial vocabulary to its anti-colonial usage. In other words, 'mimicry' inaugurates the process of anti-colonial self-differentiation through the logic of inappropriate appropriation. (149-50)

In her novel “Lyrics Alley”, Aboulela highlights the issue of imitation from a positive perspective and considers it as a fruitful process. In other words, she tackles the bright side of imitation and how her characters employ such a process to serve their interests. Aboulela articulates that some of her characters espoused the process of mimicry to earn their living on the one hand. Other characters adopt mimicry in search of modernity on the other hand. By the same token, Robert Baron and Ana C. Cara in their book “Creolization as Cultural Creativity” opine that "Problematic contact zones create situations in which mimicry becomes a way of life, an adaptation strategy, and sometimes a form of empowerment" (126).

Aboulela herself has undergone such an experience being a Sudanese writer living in Egypt. In an interview with her, Aboulela has expressed her real conflict due to cultural differences when she said:

I absorbed Sudanese culture from interaction with my father’s side of the family and the culture of Khartoum... I absorbed Egyptian culture through my mother’s family...I personally did experience many conflicts...What aggravated the problem also was that I ‘felt’ Sudanese and yet my speech was not reflecting that. Among Egyptians, I felt like a fraud, passing as one of them but being an outsider.

To put a real end to her non-stop mental conflict, Aboulela in an interview says that "I gravitated towards expressing myself in English. It was a third language, refreshingly free from the disloyalty of having to choose between my father and my mother’s tongues". In “Lyrics Alley” the novelist craftily articulates how mimicry can be espoused to be a positive strategy to earn living in a multicultural world and the way that enable the characters of the novel to get a foothold in the world of modernity.

In “Lyrics Alley”, Mahmoud Abuzeid is the one who runs the business of the whole family and also the one who has a patriotic feeling towards his country. In spite of his connection to



his nationality and his proudness being a Sudanese citizen who is "indigenous. Let no one call him an immigrant! The immigrants came...with the Anglo-Egyptian force" (Aboulela 40). Yet, he develops good trading ties with British officials in Sudan as a way to "steer his family firm through the uncertainties of self-determination and stake a place in the new independent country" (ibid). Mahmoud imitates the Western style of living and costumes to achieve his goals of developing his business and to make himself and his family live within civilized standards.

Imitation or as Bhabha calls "mimicry" has a positive impact on Abuzeid's character in that he begins his project of searching for modernity from his family. For instance, he sends his son Nur to a foreign school in Egypt and he feels so proud when "his son being praised" (Aboulela 43) by the English headmaster. That is to say, Nur represents the bright side of the colonial project. In a similar vein, Abuzeid's second marriage from Nabilah, the Egyptian woman, denotes his desire for modernity because he considers his first Sudanese wife Waheeba as "[n]ot only was she ugly and ignorant, she was chock full of venom" (ibid 100). Nabilah for him resembles modernity and she "was refined and polite and her wording was pleasing" (ibid). By the same token, John McLeod in his book "Beginning Postcolonialism" has championed Bhabha's perspective that "mimicry" is an act which denotes positivity stating that:

Previously, the notion of mimicry had been seen as a condition of the colonized's subservience and crisis, the measure of their powerlessness. But Bhabha offers a much more positive, active and insurgent model of mimicry. So, by revealing that the discourse of colonialism is forever embattled and split by ambivalence and mimicry, always doomed to failure in its attempt to represent the colonized, Bhabha avoids the criticisms of Said's work by attending to the ways in which colonial discourses are problematised by the very people they claim to represent (55).

In another situation, Abuzeid stands against Waheeba's desire "to pay for...circumcision" (ibid 47) of Nassir's daughter because Abuzeid considers such an act is a "barbarity" act. He further said that "[w]e need to stop these old customs, which have no basis in our religion and are unhealthy. Besides, it's against the law" (ibid). As a result, Waheeba accused Abuzeid of being influenced by Western customs and neglecting their deeply rooted traditions in that she said "[a]re the English going to tell us what to do with this!" (ibid). Aboulela herself went through the experience of cultural differences and she expresses such a change in her novel to describe that certain changes are useful. In this respect, she says in an interview that:

I grew up in a very westernised environment and went to a private, American school. But my personality was shy and quiet and I wanted to wear the hijab but didn't have the courage, as I knew my friends would talk me out of it.

To make a simple comparison between Mahmoud Abuzeid and his brother Idris concerning the way of thinking, lifestyle, and mentality, we can easily conclude that Idris clings to old Sudanese traditions. For instance, in their meeting with the English bank manager to discuss a deal with him concerning the cotton business, Mahmoud "was wearing his best suit, purchased from Bond Street, and his Bally shoes" (Abolela 48). Whereas Idris "was in a jellabiya" (ibid) and slippers. Even the way that "Idris sucked his tea. He did this with too much noise, the kind of noise the English would not appreciate" (ibid). For Mahmoud, Idris is "backward element in his life" (ibid) since he gives no attention to education and lifestyle.

Imitating the Western style of living, thinking, and norms, Mahmoud craftily finds a foothold in the Western mind to maintain his business. Unlike Idris, Mahmoud owns "an office, just like a British company with secretaries, filing cabinets, qualified accountants, telegram operators and everything was written down, filled in order" (Aboulela 42). Mahmoud is the one who is in a continuous search for modernity and he is the one who "kept an open mind and a determination to go with the flow" (ibid 49). But this type of mimicry does not mean that Mahmoud has abandoned his Sudanese culture and traditions. To put it another way, Mahmoud's goal out of imitation of Western standards is to gain their trust and to make his business flourish. He has an obligation towards his country because he is "[u]nlike the Mahdi and the Mirghani family firms, who were supported by the British...the Abuzeids were independent. Mahmoud was proud of that" (Aboulela 42). Arguably, Mahmoud took the positive side of mimicry to improve the financial position of the Abuzeid family without being lured by the Western ideologies.

Like her uncle Mahmoud, Soraya, Idris's daughter, strives to be a modernized woman who simultaneously espoused two different cultures. Soraya can be seen as the modernized copy of her family who adores books and "she would creep indoors, into stifling, badly lit rooms...to open a page she had marked and step into its pulsating pool of words" (Aboulela 16). She joins the Sisters' school which is administrated by the nuns. In this school Soraya becomes familiar with the Western culture and makes a lot of foreign friends. She copies the foreign styles, but at the same time she has kept her acceptable Sudanese traditions. She always wishes to be like Nabilah, Mahmoud's Egyptian wife, because "Nabilah was everything that Soraya considered modern. Nabilah's elegant clothes were modelled on the latest European fashions, and the way she held herself was like a cinema star" (ibid).

Logically speaking, Soraya's joining a foreign school in Egypt, making a lot of foreign friends and reading foreign books have a positive impact on her character. Soraya and her cousin Nur want "to be a modern couple, not to be like Fatma and Nassir each in their separate world" (Aboulela 67). Nur, from the inception, has absorbed the Western culture because he spent his time at Victoria College School in Alexandria, Egypt where he learnt the British prestige and modern styles. Unlike his brother Nassir, Nur is given a trust to be a



futuristic heir of the family business. Nur, therefore, is familiar with the fact that "though the ties of the family to Egypt were strong" (ibid 19) yet the family "carried a strong sense of their Sudanese belonging" (ibid). In other words, Nur succeeds in establishing a credible balance between his native culture and the Egyptian one in his journey for modernity.

Aboulela's "Lyrics Alley" shows the bright side of mimicry in which most of her basic characters mixed with Western culture, but at the same time, they reserve their own native culture. Aboulela articulates that imitation can be seen as a way of survival to resist the abrupt changes.

### **Conclusion**

Undoubtedly place and time have a conspicuous impact on Aboulela's writings since she lives between two spaces, Sudan and Egypt. That is to say, she is raised with a Sudanese traditional spirit and Egyptian modernity which cast a shadow on the characters of her novels. Admittedly, most of her novels mirror the interchangeable relationship between the two countries and the "intermarriage among Egyptians and Sudanese" (Sharkey 34-5).

It is noteworthy that Aboulela's "Lyrics Alley" pivots on the idea of mimicry and how such an act generates hybrid identities. Her novel can be seen as an audacious attempt to portray the positive side of mimicry and how some of her characters have developed a kind of convergence with the Western norms. Moreover, she proves that the colonial project in colonized societies has a fruitful aspect in that those colonized subjects have absorbed the Western positive ideologies and have applied them to their own families as well as their society. In other words, Aboulela succeeds in portraying the period of enlightening during the colonization era.

Nevertheless, Aboulela has also mirrored the other side of characters who stick with their outdated roots believing that they have to reject alien customs. The novelist craftily reveals how some of her other character have adopted some Western aspect to gain some advantage and to be modernized.



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