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## Finding Home Beyond Borders: Sufism and Homelessness in Leila Aboulela's Writing<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

The romantic urge for home, to which one belongs but where one can no longer be, recalling the longing for the lost Garden of Eden, may have different origins for different writers. Yet the impulse to write about one's homeland is inevitable for immigrant writers, and Sudanese-British writer Leila Aboulela is no exception. While themes of exile, faith, identity, and belonging are central throughout Aboulela's body of work, this analysis will focus specifically on her novels *Minaret* (2005), *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015), and *Bird Summons* (2019). By engaging in comparative analysis and tracing thematic threads and stylistic shifts across a broader spectrum of Aboulela's writing, this paper explores how Sufism serves as both a thematic and structural foundation, offering a lens through which homelessness, belonging, and spirituality are reimagined. It examines how Aboulela creates spaces of fresh promise where both her protagonists and Aboulela herself feel at home again, highlighting the progression of Sufi influences across her three novels. The analysis demonstrates how her engagement with Sufi principles deepens over time, culminating in a unique hybrid narrative mode—situated at the intersection of novel and masnavi traditions—that employs magical realism to destabilize Western logic and bridge Eastern and Western literary traditions.

**Keywords:** Leila Aboulela, Sufism, Homelessness, Bird Summons, The Kindness of Enemies, Magical Realism, Belonging.

### Sınırların Ötesinde Ev Bulmak: Leila Aboulela'nın Yazılarında Sufizm ve Yurtsuzluk

#### Öz

İnsanın kendini ait hissettiği ancak artık dönemediği bir eve duyduğu özlem, kaybedilen cennet bahçesine duyulan özlemi hatırlatır. Kişinin kendini ait hissettiği yere duyduğu hasret, farklı yazarlar için farklı nedenlere dayanabilse de, kendi vatani hakkında yazma dürtüsü göçmen yazarlar için kaçınılmazdır. Sudan asıllı İngiliz yazar Leila Aboulela da bu duruma bir istisna oluşturmamaktadır. Aboulela'nın neredeyse tüm eserlerinde sürgün, inanç, kimlik ve aidiyet temaları ön planda olsa da bu analiz özellikle *Minaret* (2005), *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015) ve *Bird Summons* (2019) romanlarına odaklanacaktır. Bu makale karşılaştırmalı bir analiz ile Aboulela'nın yazılarında tematik konuların ve üslup değişimlerinin izini sürerken, Sufizm'in hem tematik hem de yapısal bir temel olarak nasıl hizmet ettiğini ve evsizlik, aidiyet ve maneviyat kavramlarının bu bağlamda yeniden nasıl tasarlandığını incelemektedir. Makale, Aboulela'nın hem kahramanları hem de kendisi için yeniden "evde hissetme" alanları yarattığını ve Sufi etkilerinin üç romanı boyunca nasıl derinleştiğini vurgulamaktadır. Analiz, Aboulela'nın Sufi ilkelerine olan bağlılığının zamanla nasıl güçlendiğini ve roman ile mesnevi geleneklerinin kesişiminde, büyülü gerçeklik aracılığıyla Batı mantığını yapıbozuma uğratarak Doğu ve Batı edebi geleneklerini birleştiren benzersiz bir hibrit anlatı modu ile sonuçlandığını ortaya koymaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Leila Aboulela, Sufizm, Evsizlik, Bird Summons, The Kindness of Enemies, Büyülü Gerçekçilik, Aidiyet.

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### Introduction

With the increased migration and globalisation, the notion of belonging becomes more and more complicated. Individuals frequently experience disconnected from traditional geographic and cultural markers, leading to a sense of displacement and a crisis of identity. This struggle to locate oneself within a fluid and often fragmented social fabric is further complicated by the inherently political nature of belonging, which entails drawing boundaries and defining the “other.” This naturally brings with it the notion of “homelessness.”

The human desire for “belonging,” however, goes beyond social and political considerations and frequently has a deep spiritual component. This yearning for connection resonates not only within religious terms, such as being reunited with the divine or returning to the bliss of the Garden of Eden, but also within psychological terms, which can be understood as the primal desire for security experienced in the womb. Regardless of culture and belief systems, people wish to return to a state of wholeness and bliss. This desire is heightened in settings where the comfort of the known is absent.

Within the complex framework of displacement, immigrant writers experience a multifaceted alienation, facing not only the modern world’s frequent inability to provide existential meaning but also the profound sense of displacement that arises from being uprooted from their indigenous cultures. This wish to belong, thus, manifests itself in immigrant writers’ need to write about their homelands. Leila Aboulela’s work, for example, exemplifies this profound engagement with themes of displacement, belonging, and the enduring search for a home. By interweaving her narrative and her search for a home with an understanding of Sufism, Aboulela endeavours to find a solution to her search within a spiritual framework. Sufism, rooted in Islamic mysticism, offers a spiritual framework emphasizing self-transcendence, divine love, and the unity of existence (tawhid). The *Masnavi*, “a narrative poem” closely associated with Sufi tradition, encapsulates these principles through allegory and lyrical storytelling.<sup>3</sup> This paper uses these frameworks to explore how Aboulela navigates themes of homelessness and belonging, situating her narratives within a transcultural spiritual discourse.

This longing also echoes Wittgenstein’s assertion that “the urge towards the mystical comes of the non-satisfaction of our wishes by science. We feel that even if all possible scientific questions are answered our problem is still not touched at all.”<sup>4</sup> Sufism offers an answer to this existential predicament in its capacity to resonate across cultural boundaries and to subvert the boundaries between self and other. Its focus on spiritual enlightenment and connection to a higher power speaks directly to the yearning expressed by Wittgenstein - the search for meaning beyond the material realm and the limitations of a purely rational worldview.

Leila Aboulela, as part of this literary diaspora, exemplifies this struggle; her narratives reflect the multifaceted experiences of navigating cultural hybridity and seeking solace in the echoes of a distant home. This paper, thus, explores the intertwined concepts of homelessness and belonging in Leila Aboulela’s fiction through the lens of Sufi thought. While themes of exile, faith, identity, and belonging are central throughout Aboulela’s body of work, this analysis will focus specifically on her novels *Minaret* (2005), *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015), and *Bird Summons* (2019). By concentrating on these particular works, this analysis seeks to shed light on the evolution of Aboulela’s journey as a writer. Both literally and figuratively, Aboulela writes to go beyond the transcendent homelessness in most of her novels. Drawing from Sufism, the paper strives to question how the Sufi dialect can parallel the language of magical realism, and this can become an avenue of escape beyond the limitations of restricted boundaries of “home” and “nation.” The paper further discusses to what extent and how Sufi motives capture the essence of

<sup>3</sup> Didem Havlioğlu and Zeynep Uysal “Introduction” in *Routledge Handbook on Turkish Literature*, eds. Didem Z. Havlioğlu and Zeynep Uysal (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2023), 7.

<sup>4</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914-16*, trans. G. E. M. Anscomb. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 51e.

homelessness and provide a space where Aboulela creates herself anew.

While numerous articles discuss the religious aspect of Aboulela's work, as her narrative presents faith as the central element, few of them approach the narratives through the vantage point of Sufism. Billy Gray's book chapter (2021) and Saleh Chaoui's article (2024), however, are two seminal works that discuss Aboulela's writing from the Sufi point of view. Gray maps out Aboulela's engagement with Sufism across her novels, focusing on *the Kindness of Enemies* as reflecting the inner dynamics of Sufism.<sup>5</sup> Chaoui, also mainly concentrating on *the Kindness of Enemies*, analyses how Aboulela presents Sufism as a means of empowerment for her female migrant protagonists to resist marginalisation and redefine agency.<sup>6</sup> While the present article definitely benefits from the previous research, particularly these two works, it diverges from them as it mainly focuses on *Bird Summons*, a novel not yet addressed by previous studies, and also argues that Aboulela manages to create a Sufi Dialect through the use of magical realism and a hybrid narrative mode that exists at the intersection of novel and masnavi tradition.

By engaging in comparative analysis and tracing thematic threads and stylistic shifts across a broader spectrum of Aboulela's writing, this paper further seeks to reveal the author's transcendent search as it finds expression in her evolving literary output. This approach first explores how Aboulela writes about the problem of belonging. This is followed by an analysis of faith as a supra-national framework that can transcend cultural boundaries. The selected texts are read through the lenses of homelessness, spiritual guide, Sufi language, and palimpsestic layering. In merging these elements, Aboulela shapes a hybrid narrative that exists at the intersection of novel and masnavi, East and West, rationality and sensory experience—a unique literary space that defies traditional genre boundaries and invites readers into an enriched dialogue between cultures and forms.

### 1. The Problem of Belonging

In all the novels under examination, Aboulela accentuates the fragile nature of belonging for immigrants, especially those whose identities are visibly marked as “other” within the dominant culture. The themes of alienation and the desire to belong manifest differently across the three novels. In *Minaret*, for instance, Najwa acknowledges her otherness and its potential to disturb others, as reflected in her observation: “He might not know it, but it is safe for us in playgrounds, safe among children. There are other places in London that aren't safe, where our very presence irks people.”<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, in *The Kindness of Enemies*, Aboulela investigates the complexities of grappling with a hybrid identity, exploring the inner conflict that arises from navigating multiple cultural worlds. Natasha recounts experiencing anxiety from a young age, triggered by images of hybrid creatures that juxtaposed disparate elements.

I was seeing in these awkward composites my own liminal self. The two sides of me that were slammed together against their will, that refused to mix. I was a failed hybrid, made up of unalloyed selves. [...] My atheist [Russian] mother who blotted out my Muslim heritage. My Arab father who gave me up to Europe without a fight. [...] My intellect could rebel and I was well-read on the historical roots and taboos against miscegenation [...], but revulsion and self-loathing still slithered through my body in minute doses. The disease was in me despite the counselling and knowing better. Natasha Hussein would always be with me.<sup>8</sup>

As becomes apparent within the above-quoted passage, Natasha's experience of being a “failed hybrid” underscores the difficulties- even the impossibility- of inhabiting such a liminal space. In *Birds Summons*, Aboulela explores the experience of otherness through the characters' search for a mentor and their efforts to adapt to their

<sup>5</sup> Billy Gray, “From the Secular to the Sacred: The Influence of Sufism on the Work of Leila Aboulela” in *Narratives Crossing Borders, The Dynamics of Cultural Interaction*, eds. Herbert Jonsson, Lovisa Berg, Chatarina Edfeldt and Bo G. Jansson (Stockholm: Stockholm University Press 2021), 145-168.

<sup>6</sup> Saleh Chaoui, “Ensoulng agential praxis in a secular world: A Sufi spiritual turn in Leila Aboulela's the kindness of enemies,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 65/2, (2024): 272-284.

<sup>7</sup> Leila Aboulela, *Minaret* (New York: Black Cat, 2005), 111.

<sup>8</sup> Leila Aboulela, *The Kindness of Enemies* (New York: Grove Press, 2015), 42.

adopted homeland. Salma, Moni, and Iman—three British Muslim women—embark on a pilgrimage to the Scottish Highlands to pay respects at the grave of Lady Evelyn Cobbold, a 19th-century Scottish woman who converted to Islam. Inspired by Lady Evelyn’s life, they contemplate their own experiences as Muslim women navigating British society, seeking to reconcile their faith with the British national identity and to demonstrate the compatibility of these seemingly disparate aspects of their selves. As Aboulela writes:

She still believed in the purpose of the visit — to honour Lady Evelyn Cobbold, the first British woman to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca, to educate themselves about the history of Islam in Britain, to integrate better by following the example of those who were of this soil and their faith, those for whom this island was an inherited rather than adopted home.<sup>9</sup>

Leila Aboulela adeptly penetrated the turmoil of adapting to a place that feels inherently foreign. Her characters’ search for a role model—someone who embraced both Muslim identity and Edwardian fashion, hunted deer, and even requested bagpipes at her funeral—embodies a hope that they, too, might achieve a harmonious hybridity, fully embracing both identities without sacrificing one for the other. This struggle resonates deeply with Aboulela’s own experience as an immigrant mother who wants her baby to feel at home. In a poignant passage that encapsulates the essence of her journey, Aboulela writes:

His home. This grey will be my baby’s home and everywhere else he will travel to in the future he will measure against it. His place of childhood; snow instead of sun, Lochness monsters and unfamiliar songs. A happy childhood, I hoped, that was steady and full of trust. It was our fate to have different childhoods, different places for a homeland. The fate of all first and second-generation immigrants. I wanted him to love his homeland like I loved mine. I wanted him to love Scotland in spite of the Gulf War and in spite of the cold. Why love it? Because loving one’s homeland, like travel, is part of faith.<sup>10</sup>

This passage captures the bittersweet reality of displacement, where the yearning for a lost homeland co-exists with the imperative to embrace a new one. Aboulela highlights the intergenerational impact of migration, acknowledging the “fate” of those who inherit a fractured sense of belonging. The act of loving one’s adopted homeland, she suggests, becomes both a necessity and an act of faith. The spiritual dimension of moving away from one’s homeland (traveling) is also emphasised by Jalal al-Din Rumi, one of the most renowned Sufi masters. Rumi illustrates the transformative potential of movement and change with the “tree” metaphor: “If the tree were able to move from one place to another; It would not suffer from the saw and the harsh wounds inflicted upon it.”<sup>11</sup> This reflects Sufism’s perspective on travel as not merely a physical act but a spiritual journey of self-discovery and transcendence, resonating deeply with Sufi themes of safar (travel) and tawakkul (trust in God’s guidance during change). These principles also become a source of inspiration for Leila Aboulela. With this Sufi philosophy in mind, Aboulela approaches immigration and living in another country as an opportunity for transformation and transcendence, echoing the words of a Sufi saint: “But travel is part of our faith... Travel and the difficulties you face will be medicine for your ego’s badness. You will become softer and wiser.”<sup>12</sup>

## 2. Faith: a Supra-National and Transcultural term

Although leaving one’s homeland can be an important step in the journey of self-discovery, developing a sense of belonging to the environment in which one finds oneself presents a different challenge—one that is inherent in the experience of displacement itself. This struggle to belong also resonates with Aboulela’s own experience as a writer seeking to carve out a space for herself within the landscape of British literature, where faith stands as a defining theme. However, this was a challenging task to embark on. As Christina Phillips puts forward, “Literary texts

<sup>9</sup> Leila Aboulela, *Bird Summons* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2020), 1.

<sup>10</sup> Leila Aboulela, “Travel is part of faith,” *Wasafiri* 15731, (2000): 42.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Fatemeh Keshavarz, *Reading Mystical Lyric: The case of Jalal al-Din Rumi* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), 5.

<sup>12</sup> Aboulela, “Travel is part of faith,” 41.

may contain religious themes, characters, and imagery, but if they wish to be taken seriously by critics, these must be secularised.<sup>13</sup> This is also noted by Aboulela herself:

I want to write about faith but it is so difficult to talk about this when everyone else is talking about the political aspects. I'm concerned that Islam has not just been politicised but that it is becoming an identity. This is like turning religion into a football match, it is a distraction from the real thing.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, for Aboulela, while staying true to herself, writing about what mattered and establishing a literary identity simultaneously took much effort and necessitated a space that she had to carve out herself. Billy Gray notes "this desire to incorporate characters who are practising Muslims into contemporary English language literary fiction [...] necessarily entails the charting of a new literary space."<sup>15</sup> As this paper will further explore, Aboulela, following in the footsteps of Lady Evelyn a harmonious hybrid who preserved both her faith and Scottish identity-infuses her writing not only with faith but also successfully places it within the annals of British literature.

Faith, for Aboulela, becomes an umbrella term that transcends the limitations of political borders and national identity, offering a model of belonging grounded in supra-national and transcultural force. While this faith-based belonging inherently possesses its own set of boundaries and parameters, it simultaneously offers a more permeable and inclusive model. This model transcends geographical and cultural origins, positing a shared space of belonging rooted in spiritual affiliation, as exemplified in her novel *Minaret*.

When I was writing *Minaret*, I was thinking it would be a Muslim feminist novel. The female protagonist is disappointed in the men in her life [...] In the end, she relies on God and her faith. That's how my logic went. And I thought that if this were a secular feminist novel, then at the end she would rely on her career and maybe her friends after her disappointment with men. In *Minaret*, on the other hand, I wanted it to be that at the end she's relying on her faith rather than a career.<sup>16</sup>

As Gray argues, Aboulela presents faith "as a viable alternative to secularism and specific elements of Western modernity."<sup>17</sup> Her understanding of faith, mainly rooted in Sufi traditions, with its capacity to adapt and resonate with various traditions, transcends geographical and cultural limitations, offering a unifying transcultural and transnational force in a divided world.<sup>18</sup> This is precisely why it plays a significant role in Aboulela's exploration of faith as a unifying, transcultural force in her writing

My mother is Egyptian. I've lived everywhere except Sudan: in Oman, Cairo, here. My education is Western and that makes me feel that I am Western. My English is stronger than my Arabic. So I guess, no, I don't feel very Sudanese though I would like to be. I guess being a Muslim is my identity. What about you?<sup>19</sup>

Aboulela's writing, as reflected in *Minaret*, highlights this transnational and transcultural approach to faith. She identifies primarily as Muslim, suggesting faith supersedes national or cultural affiliations. This perspective permeates her narratives, exploring how faith, particularly Sufism offers a sense of belonging and a framework for understanding homelessness.

<sup>13</sup> Christina Phillips, "Leila Aboulela's the Translator: reading Islam in the West," *Wasafiri* 27/1, (2012): 66.

<sup>14</sup> Shirin Edwin, "(Un) Holy Alliances: Marriage, Faith, and Politics in Leila Aboulela's the Translator," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 7, (2013): 59.

<sup>15</sup> Gray, "From the Secular to the Sacred," 146.

<sup>16</sup> Claire Chambers, *British Muslim Fiction: Interview with Contemporary Writers* (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 113.

<sup>17</sup> Gray, "From the Secular to the Sacred," 146.

<sup>18</sup> Francesco Piraino and Mark Sedgwick, "Introduction" in *Global Sufism: Boundaries, Narratives and Practices*. eds. Francesco Piraino and Mark Sedgwick (London: Hurst & Company, 2019), 3.

<sup>19</sup> Aboulela, *Minaret*, 110.

### 3. Homelessness and Search for a Spiritual Home

“Homelessness” becomes a recurring motif, representing a profound spiritual yearning that transcends the physical longing for a specific place. It emerges as the central motif that drives Aboulela to seek a spiritual home that transcends geographic or cultural boundaries. In *Minaret*, for instance, Aboulela initially frames the search to fill an unnamed hollowness from a psychological framework as a desire to return to the bliss experienced in the womb. As Najwa declares there was nothing that she lacked, no dream corroded, no desire buried. Yet sometimes, she would recall pain like a healed wound. She also recalls the feeling of being together in her mother’s belly with her twin, facing each other, twisting and kicking. She wishes she could return to that time. Later, she hears azan (call to prayer).

The sound of the azan, the words, and the way the words sounded went inside me [...] and it went to a place I didn’t know existed. A hollow place. A darkness that would suck me in and finish me.<sup>20</sup>

The journey to fill this hollowness with meaning begins with the call to prayer, whose rhythmic words evoke a bliss reminiscent of the womb or the Garden of Eden. The azan serves as a catalyst, awakening a dormant spiritual awareness and revealing a void that material possessions or social standing cannot fill.

In *The Kindness of Enemies*, she examines how this hollow place, homesickness, can transform into a guiding force to discover inner peace. Aboulela starts *The Kindness of Enemies* with the following quote from Herman Hesse’s *Steppenwolf*. “...we have to grope our way through so much filth and rubbish in order to reach home! And we have no one to show us the way. Homesickness is our only guide.”<sup>21</sup> The evocative quote that prefaces the novel encapsulates this idea, suggesting that the search for spiritual fulfilment often begins with acknowledging a profound sense of displacement and longing. Through her characters’ journeys, Aboulela suggests that faith, particularly the mystical practices of Sufism, offers a path to navigate this homesickness and discover a sense of belonging rooted in spiritual connection rather than geographical location. On her website, Aboulela further reveals her desire to attain a spiritual home in the following words: “Natasha is “homeless,” so is Jamaleldin, and Shamil fought until he lost his homeland. But perhaps home is not a physical place. Perhaps it is not Sudan for Natasha or Russia for Jamaleldin, or even the Caucasus for Shamil. Perhaps there is a spiritual home that we can aspire to.”<sup>22</sup>

In an interview with Keija Parssinen, Aboulela further acknowledges that her experiences with homesickness led her to embrace the Sufi concept of a “spiritual homeland.” She states, “My fascination with the idea of home and my intense homesickness let me accept the Sufi concept of the home having a spiritual homeland different than that of the physical body.”<sup>23</sup> This concept resonates with her characters, particularly those navigating the complexities of migration and belonging in Western societies. Chaoui argues that Aboulela’s characters utilise spirituality, particularly Sufi practices, to create “an alternative space” where they can find solace and belonging.<sup>24</sup> This resonates with Natasha’s reflection in *The Kindness of Enemies*, where she acknowledges that while her homesickness persists, it guides her towards a spiritual grounding and purpose. Through their journeys, Aboulela’s characters demonstrate that the experience of displacement can become a catalyst for spiritual growth, leading to the realisation of a “home” not defined by physical location but by a profound connection to faith and community.

Aboulela constructs and deconstructs this search for a “spiritual home” through her narratives, often drawing upon Sufi philosophy. The core symbol framing Leila Aboulela’s narratives is the journey concept, reflecting the Sufi

<sup>20</sup> Aboulela, *Minaret*, 31.

<sup>21</sup> Aboulela, *The Kindness of Enemies*, 1.

<sup>22</sup> Leila Aboulela, “The Kindness of Enemies: Inspiration,” *Leila Aboulela*, accessed 31 October 2024. <https://leila-aboulela.com/books/the-kindness-of-enemies/>

<sup>23</sup> Keija Parssinen, “Writing as spiritual offering: A conversation with Leila Aboulela,” *World Literature Today* 94/1, (2020): 29.

<sup>24</sup> Chaoui, “Ensoulng Agential Praxis in A Secular World,” 274.

understanding of a spiritual quest toward truth. As Rumi articulated, the “Sufi path” is a process of mystical awakening achieved through a deliberate embarking upon a journey, often marked by hardship and deprivation.<sup>25</sup> This concept of “depriving while giving” underscores the transformative power of hardship, echoing the Sufi belief that physical and emotional trials act as catalysts for spiritual growth and renewal.<sup>26</sup>

The journey undertaken by the protagonists in Leila Aboulela's *Bird Summons* transcends a physical pilgrimage, evolving into a quest for self-discovery deeply intertwined with Sufi philosophy. As quoted above, Aboulela observes, “Travel away from home and the difficulties will be a medicine for your ego's badness; you will return softer and wiser.”<sup>27</sup> This sentiment underscores the transformative potential of literal and metaphorical journeys within the Sufi tradition.

#### 4. Sufism in Leila Aboulala's Works

Aboulela's fascination with Sufism permeates all her works. In her earlier works, such as *The Translator*, *Days Rotate*, *Minaret*, *Lyrics Alley*, and *The Kindness of Enemies*, Sufism is woven into the narrative and character development, as also noted by Gray. In these narratives, Aboulela's characters frequently engage with Sufi texts, teachings, and practices. While *The Translator*, for example, includes a Sufi-inspired uncle, *Lyrics Alley* references Sufi-influenced poetry by Umar Ibn al-Farid and *Days Rotate* in *Coloured Lights* cites from the diwan of Sheik AlAlawi. *The Kindness of Enemies*, however, becomes one with a significant focus on Sufism, with references to Sufi rituals, Sufi sheikhs, and Sufi Tariqas, as well as elaborating the story of Imam Shamil, a true Sufi, whose teacher Sheikh Jamal el-Din al Husayni, preferred books to war.

*Bird Summons*, in contrast, marks a significant departure as it does not include any Sufi Sheikhs or characters with deep Sufi knowledge. On the surface, the story does not even have any direct references to Sufism. However, a deeper excavation reveals all the connections and the Sufi core of the narrative, from the bird symbol to the elements of magical realism. As Gray observes “a detailed reading of Aboulela's fiction reveals the extent to which the “outer” and “inner” aspects of Sufi religious practice are visible in her texts.”<sup>28</sup> While I fully endorse this statement, I propose that the true inner aspect of Sufism is more fully realised in *Bird Summons* than in *The Kindness of Enemies*, emerging particularly through Aboulela's invocation of the Masnavi tradition.

The masnavi form, often employed for writing lengthy narrative works due to the ease it provided in finding rhymes,<sup>29</sup> serves as a significant point of reference in literary traditions associated with Sufi mysticism. While *Bird Summons* adopts a Western novel form, it is permeated with features reminiscent of the masnavi tradition. Aboulela invokes this tradition through structural elements such as lyrical composition, a multi-layered narrative, and the use of magical realist and allegorical language. These elements not only echo the narrative and symbolic complexity of the masnavi but also embed Sufism deeply within the text's symbolic and linguistic fabric, creating a hybrid narrative mode that bridges Eastern and Western literary traditions.

##### 4.1. Need for a Spiritual Guide

One of the main tenets of Sufism is the necessity of a mentor on the spiritual path. Ibn Arabi asserts, “It is through God that one knows masters, and through masters that one knows God.”<sup>30</sup> In *Bird Summons*, the hoopoe, a

<sup>25</sup> Franklin D. Lewis, *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West: The Life, Teachings, and Poetry of Jalla al-Din Rumi* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), 87.

<sup>26</sup> Mark Sedgwick, *Sufism: The Essentials* (The American University in Cairo Press, 2003), 112.

<sup>27</sup> Aboulela, “Travel is part of faith,” 41.

<sup>28</sup> Gray, “From the Secular to the Sacred,” 148.

<sup>29</sup> Fatma S. Kutlar, “Mesnevî Nazım Şekline Genel Bir Bakış ve Türk Edebiyatında Mesnevî Araştırmalarıyla İlgili Bir Kaynakça Denemesi,” *Türkbilig/Türkoloji Araştırmaları Dergisi* 1/1, (2000): 105.

<sup>30</sup> Eric Geoffroy, *Introduction to Sufism: the inner path of Islam*, trans. Roger Gaetani. (Indiana: World Wisdom, 2010), 142.

recurring symbol in Sufi literature, emerges as a guide for the three women's arduous journeys- a kind of spiritual pilgrimage. This transformative experience is reminiscent of the relationship between a sheikh and their Sufi disciples, where the sheikh guides the seekers on a path of spiritual enlightenment. The hoopoe, much like the sheikh, offers wisdom and direction, guiding the women towards self-discovery and spiritual awakening.

This mentor motif resonates with Aboulela's previous works, such as *Minaret* and *The Kindness of Enemies*, where characters grapple with the complexities of faith and identity, often finding solace and direction through the guidance of mentors. Natasha reflects on the situation:

Malak, the teacher disguised as an actor. Natasha the student, acting the part of a teacher. I had come to her today needing to connect, wanting to spend time in her company. Perhaps it was time to acknowledge that what I was after was spiritual. She was ready to be a guide, and I would fight my weaknesses in order to follow.<sup>31</sup>

Aboulela underscores the need and challenges of having a mentor: "Without a guide, one can go no further. But not everyone finds a guide. Not everyone accepts a guide."<sup>32</sup> This statement highlights the challenges inherent in the spiritual journey, emphasising that seeking guidance is essential, yet the willingness to accept and embrace it rests with the individual. Through her characters' experiences, Aboulela suggests that the path to spiritual enlightenment is rarely solitary; it requires acknowledging our vulnerabilities and embracing the wisdom offered by those who have navigated the path before us. Yet it is nearly impossible for a guide to convey fully what they have felt on this journey, as the spiritual path brings unique sensations to each individual. Sufis have creatively expressed their experiences to bridge this gap, using symbolic language, metaphors, narrative techniques, and abstract visualisations. These methods help to communicate complex feelings and states of being, allowing others to grasp the nature of a journey that words alone cannot describe.

#### 4.2. Allegorical Language and Sufism

The hoopoe, a richly layered symbol serves not only as a mentor but also as an allegorical figure -breaking through rational boundaries by introducing magical realism into the narrative. By having hoopoe as both mentor and second author, Aboulela in a way reimagines a classic masnavi, Farid ud-Din Attar's *The Conference of the Birds* and connects the story to Sufi literary traditions. As a symbolic bird, the hoopoe is used allegorically and becomes the medium through which Aboulela navigates between rational and sensory, resisting rational interpretation. This approach resonates with key characteristics of the masnavi form. As identified by Cem Dilçin, one of the defining features of the masnavi is to be filled with events that defy rational and logical boundaries.<sup>33</sup> While this literary technique has deep roots in Eastern literary tradition, it is often recognised today through the lens of magical realism. By employing magical realism, she constructs a literary space where spiritual experiences can be articulated beyond the limitations of conventional language and logic. As Fatemeh Keshavarz suggests, "by its very existence, [mystical poetry] promises to express the inexpressible," Aboulela's work similarly attempts to communicate what cannot easily be captured by rational discourse.<sup>34</sup> In one of her interviews, Aboulela addresses the need for a new language to express faith: "If modern-day secular discourse does not have the language to explain [faith], then I have to create this language or chart this new space. This is the biggest motivation I have to write."<sup>35</sup>

It is also important to note that in *Bird Summons*, Aboulela attains this "new space" by employing magical realism not merely as a stylistic device but as a means of deconstructing conventional narrative structures and

<sup>31</sup> Aboulela, *The Kindness of Enemies*, 329.

<sup>32</sup> Aboulela, *The Kindness of Enemies*, 259.

<sup>33</sup> Gülşen Çulhaoğlu Pirencek, "Literary Genres vis-à-vis: Novel-Masnavi and the Position of the Narrator," *Cankaya University Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 12/1-2, (2018): 114.

<sup>34</sup> Keshavarz, *Reading Mystical Lyric*, 31.

<sup>35</sup> Chaoui, "Ensouling Agential Praxis in A Secular World," 4.



mirroring the non-linear, often paradoxical nature of Sufi thought. This approach can also be understood as a decolonial strategy. In parallel to Chaoui's argument regarding Aboulela's ability to "infiltrate the English linguistic repertoire with experiences that fall within the spiritual and religious contours of Islam" as a decolonial strategy, Aboulela's act of infusing masnavi, a form associated with the mystical, into a secular genre can also be interpreted as a decolonial approach.<sup>36</sup>

The novel *Bird Summons* challenges the limitations of the "rational mind," as the hoopoe, serving as a second narrator and spiritual guide, manifests a defiance of reason. Along with the hoopoe, the characters also undergo transformations that defy logical explanation. For instance, Salma's metamorphosis into a doormat, Moni's into a swiss-ball, and İman into a beast symbolise a shedding of ego and surrendering to a higher power. This echoes the Sufi understanding of the self's dissolution in the face of the divine, a concept often described as *fana* (annihilation), which parallels the dissolution of boundaries between self and other. By disrupting the familiar boundaries of the body and its functions, Aboulela invites the reader to embrace a different way of perceiving reality that transcends the confines of logic and reason.

By deconstructing traditional narrative structures and embracing the fluidity of magical realism, Aboulela creates a space for exploring Sufi concepts in a way that resonates with both the heart and the mind. This embrace of the irrational aligns with the core tenets of Sufism, which often challenges Western binary thinking. As Fontana notes, while the Eastern mind can embrace the "both-and" principle, Western logic adheres to "either-or" logic, which brings limitations to it.<sup>37</sup> This resonates with Sufism's understanding and magical realism's ability to hold seemingly contradictory truths simultaneously, creating a space where the impossible becomes possible. As Geoffroy also puts forward in the Koran, God presents Himself as both the Outer (*al-Zāhir*) and the Inner (*al-Bātin*), under seemingly opposite names. The Sufi, through their spiritual search, seeks to reconcile these apparent contradictions, illustrating the synthesis of opposites that is central to Sufi practice.<sup>38</sup>

Along with employing magical realism to confront the rational mind, another strategy adopted by Aboulela is a lyrical narrative that echoes a key feature of the masnavi, which literally translates to "each string of the couplet rhyme."<sup>39</sup> This lyrical approach enhances the narrative's emotional depth while aligning with Sufi literature's poetic traditions. Though the book's cover displays only the title and the author's name, its specific writing font and colours turn the letters into a visual dance and foreground the novel's lyricism. As also acknowledged in *The Guardian* review, *Bird Summons* is "a lyrical examination of identity." This lyrical quality not only mirrors the spiritual journeys of the three protagonists but also creates a rhythmic, reflective tone reminiscent of the lyricism in Sufi poetry and spiritual writing.<sup>40</sup>

### 4.3. Palimpsest Usage

Another technique Aboulela employs that also defies the either-or concept and aligns with the masnavi tradition is the palimpsestical layering of texts and symbols. In masnavis, the themes and stories are not often original; instead, they are translated, adapted, or rewritten from earlier works. As Cem Dilçin notes, the Ottoman masnavi poet aims to elevate existing stories through unique style and imagery, making the text distinct even if the content follows tradition.<sup>41</sup> This aligns with Aboulela's multi-layering strategy -palimpsestic layering - to explore themes of

<sup>36</sup> Chaoui, "Ensoulng Agential Praxis in A Secular World," 275.

<sup>37</sup> David Fontana, "Altered State: Mysticism" in *The Blackwell Companion to Consciousness*, eds. Susan Schneider and Max Velmans (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing, 2017), 220.

<sup>38</sup> Geoffroy, *Introduction to Sufism*, 1.

<sup>39</sup> Pirencek, "Literary Genres vis-à-vis," 113.

<sup>40</sup> Rhiannon Lucy Cosslet, "Bird Summons by Leila Aboulela review: Lyrica examination of identity," *The Guardian* (April 2019).

<sup>41</sup> Pirencek, "Literary Genres vis-à-vis," 115.

alienation and belonging. She constructs a narrative tapestry that reveals the interconnectedness of seemingly disparate cultures by interweaving myths and stories from diverse traditions. This approach is particularly evident in *the Kindness of Enemies* where she presents a layered narrative, weaving together Imam Shamil's historical struggle for independence against Tsarist Russia with the contemporary experiences of Natasha Hussein, a history lecturer of Russian and Sudanese heritage, residing in Scotland. Similarly, in *Bird Summons*, the hoopoe has a diverse repertoire of tales, encompassing Sufi poetry, Sanskrit fables, and Scottish folklore. As a secondary narrator, the hoopoe weaves together Celtic and Sufi myths, reflecting the palimpsestic structure permeating the narrative. As Aboulela notes, this literary strategy dismantles the notion of the "Other" by highlighting shared human experiences across cultures: "The similarity between them was more than difference."<sup>42</sup>

In her author's note, Aboulela explicitly acknowledges the hoopoe's palimpsestic nature, stating, "The Hoopoe in the novel comes with stories...Having now reached the Scottish Highlands, the hoopoe is also well versed in the fables of selkies and shape-shifters...He is familiar with *The Pilgrim's Progress* and the fantasy world of George MacDonald."<sup>43</sup> This deliberate juxtaposition of cultural and religious references highlights the universality of storytelling and its power to bridge cultural divides.

Through the hoopoe's multifaceted narratives, Aboulela invites readers to recognise the shared threads that connect humanity across geographical and cultural boundaries. The hoopoe, having "seen east and west, north and south," becomes a symbol of unity and interconnectedness, embodying a spiritual philosophy that transcends cultural differences and fosters a deeper understanding of our shared human heritage. This shared human heritage is also conveyed through another intricate layering, the references to the castles and religious places in all her novels. Aboulela underlines the historical significance of these places, such as Dunnottar Castle in *The Kindness of Enemies* and an unnamed castle in Scotland in *Bird Summons*. In both instances, Aboulela underscores the importance of superimposed stories of the places, echoing an archaeological excavation of the history. In *Bird Summons*, this palimpsestic nature of the spaces—where characters walk and touch the places once inhabited by those who lived centuries ago—reveals the deep connection one can have with previous generations. This physical interaction with history emphasizes the continuity of human experiences, allowing characters to engage with the past personally and fostering a sense of belonging to a larger narrative. Through these evocative settings, Aboulela illustrates how the echoes of past lives resonate in the present, enriching the characters' understanding of their own identities and spiritual journeys.

It struck her that Lady Evelyn must have come here as a girl in the late nineteenth century, as an adult in the twentieth. [...] Once again Salma felt a closeness to her, an awareness that was more than curiosity. In the chapel, she stood on consecrated ground, the sky above her withholding rain. In 1276, people knelt here and worshipped. They were not her ancestors and she did not share their religion, but she understood them.<sup>44</sup>

As becomes evident, the historical resonance and spiritual undertones bridge past and present in these settings. In this space, characters encounter the cumulative wisdom of those who came before.

## Conclusion

In this unsettled age, marked by an unprecedented rate of migration and globalisation, individuals across cultures and religions search for meaning and belonging. Leila Aboulela herself, in search of a spiritual home, needed to craft a literary space that resonates with this quest. From her debut novel, *the Translator*, Leila Aboulela elucidated her interest in Sufism by including Sufi-inspired characters and Sufi knowledge - sometimes with just a word, at

<sup>42</sup> Aboulela, *Bird Summons*, 267.

<sup>43</sup> Aboulela, *Bird Summons*, 287.

<sup>44</sup> Aboulela, *Bird Summons*, 40.

other times through extended passages. However, as her literary journey progresses, her engagement with Sufism deepens and transforms. In her later work, particularly *Bird Summons*, the narrative becomes infused with a Sufi dialect, evolving beyond the Western novel form into a hybrid that blends elements of the masnavi with the novel, where a rich, layered poetic form deeply rooted in the Sufi tradition bourgeons. This new space was needed to voice mystical ideas, capture the fluidity of reality, and voice alternative ways of knowing and being. By embracing the magical and the mystical, Leila Aboulela challenges readers to look beyond the confines of Western rationality and embrace a more expansive and multifaceted view of the world.

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