

ARAB MUSLIM IMMIGRANTS' CRISIS OF IDENTITY IN ABOULELA'S "THE OSTRICH" (2005) AND SOUEIF'S "1964" (1983)

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Received: 01/03/2022

Accepted: 22/05/2022

Published 04/06/2022

Abstract

The present paper probes into identity crisis and its effects on the psyche of Arab Muslim immigrants as it is depicted through the two short stories *The Ostrich* by Leila Aboulela and *1964* by Ahdaf Soueif. Undergoing acculturation and displacement, Arab Muslims in the diaspora, develop crisis of identity. This issue, which proves to be too problematic, lays a series of crucial questions as: How do immigrants deal with the new culture of the host land? Do they experience high levels of identity crisis? How do they manage to assimilate the foreign identity? Does identity crisis cause them severe psychological pain? Do they find alternatives to get some relief? Based on a psychoanalytic approach, this study provides tentative answers to all the aforementioned questions; demonstrates that all the three main characters --namely Majdy, Sumar and Aisha—are homesick and alienated and suffer from varying degrees of identity crisis as a response to dislocation and lack of belongingness, which in turn creates symptoms of stress and depression.

Keywords: Arab Muslim Immigrants; Identity Crisis; Homesickness; Psychological Effects; Lack of Belongingness.

1. Introduction

A distinguished literary phenomenon has introduced a category of writers, namely Arab writers of different backgrounds and origins, using the foreign language of their ex-colonisers with the aim of confronting them. Post-Colonial writing emerges so as to wipe out centuries of misrepresentation of the East and its people, voice the concerns of Eastern people, and raise to debate the different tensions and implications facing them as ex-colonised nations; these nations who have been rated among the first in terms of immigration towards the West (United Nations, 2019). It is ultimately worth discussing the suffering of Arab Muslims in the diaspora while being torn between what is traditional and what is modern, between past and present, East and West. Diaspora/immigration does not only affect these people's linguistic identities but also their cultural identities. In the present paper, the long-range implication of identity crisis and its effects will be addressed in relation to the selected texts; viz. Leila Aboulela's *The Ostrich* (from the short stories collection *Coloured Lights*) and Ahdaf Soueif's *1964* (from the short stories collection *Aisha*). Both Aboulela's and Soueif's characters are represented as subject to severe cultural confrontations leading to varying-degree complications, mainly psychological.

2. Identity Crisis, Homesickness and Distress

The loss of the sense of community, belonging and integrity is what matters most in *The Ostrich* and *1964*; where the authors address the reconciliation of different cultures and identities as too complex a task. Both Aboulela and Soueif started from writing about their own experiences, of the struggle between their origin/first identity and the assimilated one; exhibiting, thus, the internal conflict that mainly the post-colonial Arab migrant is bearing between his/her old and new culture; language, customs and traditions. Their characters—as immigrants and bilinguals-- represent their personal migratory experience which, in turn, reflects the effects of their own cultural amalgamation.

Throughout the whole story, *The Ostrich*, Aboulela refers to the dichotomies existing between East and West –in an attempt to report

cultural differences that impede Sumra as an Eastern immigrant woman to easily or quickly adapt to the Western life. She tackles the complexities of being an Arab Muslim in a European Christian society—England--depicting, hence, the sense of alienation and the feeling of *belonging to nowhere*. Torn between two different customs and traditions, religions, and languages, Aboulela's and Soueif's characters endure a great loss; mostly psychological. Both Aisha in *1964* and Sumra in *The Ostrich* suffer the dilemma of identity, self-awareness and self-discovery, as an outcome of cultural and radicalized alienation. They realize that they are socially, culturally and religiously unsettled. Considering rootedness, both characters feel rootless, in terms of ethnic and national affiliations, in addition to family contexts.

Only once in their life, they felt ethnically identified and attached; in their homelands. Ethnic identity has to do with “awareness, self-labeling, attitude and behavior that result in individuals’ identification with a particular group as well as the emotional attachment to that group” (Veruyten 2018 quoted in Baldemaj and Small 2019: 644). It is the sameness that a given people share and that determine their life style. Many –like Moss (2010) confirm, nevertheless, that identity is being day-by-day reshaped according to continual new experiences. Besides its being interaction and participation, migration must be also seen as integration. Once traversing the boundaries, one has to learn to integrate into the host land –not necessarily embodying all its values and norms, but to try to fit into the new environment.

On the whole, identity is interrelated with belonging and commitment to the group, self-identification with that group and sharing beliefs, ethnic traditions and practices. In this respect it is impossible for these characters to achieve this degree of ethnic identity in the others’ space, in a foreign atmosphere. Romhild (2017) addresses Post-migration as a concept transcending meanings we formulated before about migrant and migration, denouncing the notion of *othering* and the gap keeping going larger and larger between the so-called margins and the majority society.

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Aisha is daily complaining of harsh feelings of alienation and yearning for belongingness. "I wanted nothing more than to merge, to blend in silently and belong to the crowd and I wasn't about to declare myself Mohammedan, or even a Muslim" (34). One important issue in the story *1964* is Muslim immigrants' fear to freely practice their religious beliefs. As for Aisha herself, she feels too frightened to even declare herself a Muslim. Difference in religion is what separates cultures; Aisha hides her being a Muslim to be accepted and assimilated by the new community (the Christian community). Her attempts to hide her identity reflect how hard she strives to fight any possible consideration of her as *not same*. She knows very well that her being a Mohammedan will impede her from making friends with her British school mates.

All the characters are in constant quest for an identity in a foreign atmosphere; all striving to find a form of stable identity to belong to, to recognize their *selves*. They are living with half-selves; frequently searching for the other half to be complete, full-rounded individuals. Male and female characters, however, respond differently to psychic troubles occurring because of this dilemma. Amidst social dislocation, female characters –Aisha and Sumra-- try to find an alternative to escape from distress and depression.

True it is that their sense of identity is torn between past and present, caused by the push and pull of culture; but it is this very fact of going back to the past that offers them a sanctuary. Both, Sumra and Aisha live a schizophrenic life. Sumra's both lives are superficial; Sudan represents an imaginary theatrical scene which she can never belong to again, but keeps drawing inspiration from it. It is only in Sudan that she thinks she had action, souvenirs, and conversations (with those whom she loves); in London she feels in *hibernation*; where life is static and colorless. Sumra thinks she has left contentment behind, in Sudan; and that she can never recover it here in London. Her memories and her faith is the only thing consoling her in her estrangement. They are the only solace that helps her imagine and create a borderland for her own, existing in her mind alone. "Her characters [Aboulela's] have the capacity to meaningfully reinvent

themselves in the host country, while still drawing on their homelands for inspiration” (Dintrin 2014: 71); while discovering chances for underlining new purposes and meanings for their new lives amidst their *diasporic* experiences.

It is through the character Sumra that Aboulela depicts how *diasporic* people re-connect with their lost home-place by reflective nostalgia, offering themselves in such a sense some relief from traumatic dislocation. Too important it is, though, to mention that feeling of instability by constantly oscillating between past Sudan and present London, Sumra undergoes a crisis of identity.

Moss (2010) argues that stereotypes produced against a group of people affect their behavior, and thus, identity. Majdy appears to be highly influenced by stereotypes; he views his country from a Western lens. He represents one of this category of Third World people who consider themselves as backward, weak, corrupt...; the very stereotypical vision of the Westerners to the Easterners. A feeling and ideology that keep handed down from one generation to another and that make them hold particular admiration of the West. He clearly shows signs of xenophilia. He appreciates Western norms while the Westerners look down to him.

He dislikes it if I walk few steps behind him, what people would think, he says, that we are backward, barbaric. He sneers at the Arab women in black *abayas* walking behind their men. Oppressed, that’s what people would think of them. Here, they respect women, treat them as equal; we must be the same he says (...) he had decided to imitate to prove that though we are Arabs and Africans, we can be modern too (36)

Majdy fully absorbs the controlling culture of England (as an ex-colonising country). He imitates the Westerners in a total exactness that blinds him from evaluating the equation from other perspectives; that the Arabs are not inferior to them, that having a different culture is in no way criterion for lack of modernity and civilization. He is extremely fascinated by the

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Western vision of Arab Muslims; fully and uncritically absorbs their sneering descriptions of them.

"I had to remember to walk next to him not loiter behind" (35). This actually reflects one of the stereotypes that label the Arabs –and the third world in general, as the West depict Arab Muslim women as oppressed and subordinate; a sign of accusing Muslims of barbarism and backwardness. The Western perception of Islam in general and women's Islamic dress, the veil or *hijab*, in particular, is also a sensitive point put into question by Aboulela; while she intelligently uses it as a symbol to fight against the Western prejudices. Despite Sumra's fear of racism, she openly and proudly displays her religious difference in a British context, contrary to Aisha who keeps it hidden. "I mentioned polygamy [in the company of British friends of Majdy] once saying we shouldn't condemn something that Allah had permitted, remarking that Majdy's father had a second wife. When they left he slapped me. Why, why I asked and he slapped me more." (41). Majdy tries to always remind her to behave in a way that represents *him* as a civilized Third World man, neglecting –by that—that being violent on women is the very aspect of being uncivilized.

Apart from his showing a blind obsession with the Western life and standards, Majdy also proves himself to be too offensive, rude and violent with his wife; contradicting what he believes of women's crucial rights and status in the West. "They can forgive you your ugly colour, your thick lips and rough hair, but you must think modern thoughts, be like them in the inside if you can't be from the outside (...) his comments about how I looked. I would stand in front of the mirror and Allah Forgive me, hate my face" (41). Majdy proves to be more hostile than the foreigners themselves to his own wife.

Another illustration of his resignation of his faith at the expense of gratifying his suppressed ego among his British friends "Majdy says: if you cover your hair in London, they will think I was forcing you to do that. They won't believe it is what you want. So I must walk unclothed [without a hair scarf]" (42). Majdy forces his wife, Sumra, to remove her scarf – which has become so intimate to her-- in front of his male and female

friends. In so doing, he makes her feel more insecure and above all guilty (for contradicting her religious norms as a Muslim woman). He easily surrenders his religion just to please his English friends; it is rather to save his crushed ego –as he may think himself is doing.

Majdy does not speak out of pride or feeling of assimilation to the Western culture, but out of a sense of inferiority complex. His complex inferiority is rather revealed in his saying “Every one of them is better than us” (40). He regards his people as uncivilized compared to the Westerners, and he gradually abandons his country’s values and his own sense of belonging to it. Besides the different prejudices and stereotypes formed against them, what makes Majdy ashamed of his origin and work hard to hide it, along with his readiness to assimilate into the host culture, is his fear of social rejection. He thinks to be accepted as modern and civilized he has to embrace Western standards. The East, in that sense, represents a passive recipient of Western knowledge and meaning.

His faith is undermined by the Western culture. His detachment from his native culture and his endeavour to imitate and assimilate the Western one only intensify his feeling of loss and sense of unbelonging to both cultures. What further sharpens his sense of displacement is his inability to align to neither group –which is not the case with his wife, nevertheless, who-- despite her feeling of homesickness-- though she cannot join the new culture, and though she is far distant from her homeland, she still feels part of the East. She could secure some degree of her traditional identity. Her sole problem is her longing to return to Sudan, to feel home and freely practise her native customs and culture. Accordingly, Majdy regards her as backward and continuously teases her for her failure and unreadiness to embrace the so-called civilized values of the West. “You look like something from the Third world” (53); these were Majdy’s first words when meeting Sumra, his wife, at London airport after her two-month holiday in Sudan, and these were the same words the story starts with. His harsh speech to Sumra carries the Westerners’ racism against Third World people, mainly the Arabs.

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Hence, the story opens with exhibiting Sumra's sense of otherness, alienation and humiliation in the host country, as she sets the first foot at London Airport after two months of absence. Sumra's feeling of alienation starts first with her husband's humiliation of her; he continuously tries to convince her that she could never change herself towards the best, towards modernity; can never adopt European values which he considers as the norms of life that any individual on Earth should abide by. He makes her feel ashamed of herself and her look; in this sense Majdy is exacerbating his wife's feeling of estrangement. "And I suddenly felt ashamed not only for myself but for everyone else who arrived with me on that aeroplane. Our shabby luggage, our stammering in front of the immigration officer, our clothes ..." (35). Language barrier is also another warning symptom that reminds and reassures most Arab immigrants of their being in the *wrong atmosphere*. Majdy makes her suddenly realize her inferiority to the Westerners, her displacement in a wrong land. "For two years I looked out at strangers, unable to make stories about them, unable to tell who was rich who was poor, who mended the pipes and who healed the ill. And sometimes (this was particularly disturbing) not even knowing who was man and who was woman" (40). Her cultural ignorance of this foreign community is likely what increases her fear to adopt its identity. She eventually turns closed up at home, putting herself out of strangers' sight.

Keeping intact in a foreign country is a great challenge for immigrants, as Ralph Waldo Emerson has once pointed in his famous quote *to be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment*. Arriving at this understanding, we may say that each character represents a different level of British culture assimilation. In their home country, on the other hand, they all seem alike; having the same colour, same looks, having same behaviours and attitudes, sharing same beliefs and traditions... "I remembered why the ostrich's bride had seemed familiar. She was a younger version of myself" (50); these are Sumra's last words before the story closing, implying that she can see in the ostrich's bride the sense of belonging; she can see in her all what she cannot see, or find, in London, the foreign space. This is because in London, she

finds herself *unique*, extremely the *opposite* of all the others. She strives to see at their faces a similar copy of her, yet and unfortunately cannot. She feels alone, alienated and contrasting all of them. In the ostrich's wife's face, however, she can see her own; she can see her culture and home.

Sumra's homesickness clearly displays in her while recalling Sudan and Sudanese people with whom she shares not only customs and culture but also emotions and warmth; things she is yearning for and heavily missing in London. Recalling her past, her homeland, provides her with warmth affection that she lacks in England, this hibernate land –as she herself comes to refer to it. Recalling her homeland becomes as “a reconciliation, warm like a mother's embrace, soft like the afternoon breeze in Ibn Zaydoun's poem” (50).

She misses her people “acknowledging each other with nods and small smiles. Now [in London they] were separate” (36). Third World immigrants –like Sumra—leave their dears, homes, and customs behind. Worse, they leave their sense of pride behind; the very essence of their selves. This increases their hurt psyches and mitigates their crisis of identity.

Sumra has brought with her some of her nation and her culture's soul. “From the land of famine, you bring me food! Again the mocking tone, but I knew he was pleased. They [plaited cheese and grapefruit] were things he secretly missed” (39). Majdy suffers from homesickness but never confesses it; he consoles himself by listing the negative side of his country (corruption, civil war ...); referring to his native culture as ‘primitive tribal mentality’ and mocking his country.

By her submissiveness and excessive fear, the character Sumra gives the impression of her being an ultimately helpless immigrant. Yet, she strives and indeed thrives to keep her identity as a Muslim intact; she holds tight to the religion of her homeland. Aboulela introduces very important aspects of her culture in the few pages of her short story; she talks about their literature, civilization and religion; a concern that consumes a considerable room in the limited volume of the short story, and a fact that renders it a very essential one. Through the different passages that the

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author uses to describe life style in Sudan, one may not fail to notice Aboulela's deliberate inclusion of critical components of her faith, Islam, every here and there (like the breaks for prayers at the university of Khartoum...); in such a way to faithfully represent her culture and religion, and to assert Sumra's attachment to her religion as well. "I would know that I was part of this harmony that I needed no permission to belong ... here in London Majdy does not pray. This country, he says, bit by bit, chips away at your faith" (43). These are Majdy's excuses to resigning his religion for the sake of embracing the new identity that he thinks will introduce him as *modern*.

He is, however, in constant attempt, rather in a struggle, to fit into the new culture, the new home. His striving to assimilate the Western ideology and mentality badly affects him; makes him live in a total disillusionment. "You brought back many memories home. Of people I love and I've left behind, of what I once was years ago" (47-48). Seeming too ungrateful, Majdy secretly suffers from homesickness. In a moment of extreme nostalgia, he cannot help but divulge his yearning for his people, home, country and mainly *identity*. At the same time he is emotionally hurt for resigning his home culture and native identity. He is a silent sufferer. He is silently suffering because of the clashing ideologies ruling his mind. In contrast, his wife, Sumra, unconsciously refuses any change in her identity. His struggling to *be like them*, and her unwillingness to adopt the new culture, create cross-cultural conflicts difficult to settle for this Sudanese-born English-resident couple, adding to their feeling of estrangement and identity crisis. None of them could achieve or maintain a balance between old and new identity.

Majdy has a sense of guilt for his detachment of his original home and abandonment of his native values. His conscience makes him aching for home. Bhugra (2004) argues that the process of migration creates a sense of alienation and dislocation which in turn develop different degrees of stress for individuals and families alike. Noting here that it is not immigration per se but living in an alien culture which rises stress, as Organista (2009) explains: "Living with people of a different culture and

living in a different political and economic system have shown to have a negative influence on the overall mental health of immigrants”. In the same way, Gassman and Skinner (2018) put forward that changes occurring in values, behaviours and beliefs, namely changes in identity, during the process of acculturation have strong –negative—impact which leads to psychological changes as it is a very stressful process.

He envies Sumra for her intactness, “I envy you because you are displaced yet intact, unchanged while I question everything and I am not sure of anything anymore” (48). He is emotionally unstable for losing his qualities, beliefs, resigning his native identity, and worse, for being without any specific identity; in a word he is lost. Sumra, on her part, envies the ostrich’s bride –the ostrich was an ex-classmate of her at Sudan University and whom she coincidentally meets at the airplane in her way to London. Although, the author does not seem to be fairly generous as far as providing details about Sumra’s envy of the Ostrich’s wife, readers are very likely to attribute these feelings of envy to longing for being fixed home among people she loves.

Sumra blames herself to turn back to London after her last visit to Khartoum. “I was wrong to return. All the laughter and confidence has been left behind. *What am I doing here?* A stranger suddenly appearing on the stage with no part to play, no lines to read” (41/my use of italics). She is not still convinced of her having left Sudan. She still feels herself a stranger in London; she does not feel part of the British society; shares no roots no past and no identity with it. Her cross-cultural conflicts escalate because of their indifference to her; she feels as an unwelcome guest in this emotion-frozen host land; an intruder ‘what I am doing here?’ She keeps asking herself every now and then. One might sense a wistful sigh behind Sumra’s rhetorical question; she is reproaching herself as being the cause of her own uprooting, of her own suffering.

She also blames herself for failing to convince Majdy to keep and maintain his origin culture and preserve his traditions. “Perhaps I am [she is] not strong enough to hold him to his roots” (37), to secure him from loss, and save him from the feeling of guilt.

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"Culture determines a person's affiliation to a certain geographical place, certain traditions, as well as determines certain behaviours" (Englund, 2020: 4). Loss of this affiliation to their homelands and traditions leads them to lose their identity, and this hence creates identity crisis. In both stories, one loses the 'mental code' as (2009) comes to label it; the fact that worsens their sense of alienation and displacement and which represents a traumatic experience for the characters.

They all feel detached from their native socio-cultural atmospheres, feeling thus unsettled and having their identity affected and their psyches hurt. However, although Aisha is described as a homesick, she follows Western trends; her dreams are mapped with pop songs and jukebox, youth clubs and parties. She is nevertheless not able to reconcile herself with London's weather; she is trapped by London's darkness and coldness, and this is what largely triggers her depression and causes her yearning for her warm and familiar homeland.

As an attempt to prove herself among her British classmates who intentionally try to bother her by referring to the incivility and backwardness of Egyptian people, of her people, Aisha risks develop fractured identity. She tries to do as they do –or more—to demonstrate herself better than them. Their sneering remarks, mainly those by her mate Susan, indeed hurt her feelings and make her take a firm decision not to leave any opportunity for her –or any other-- to ridicule her any more. This is what Bhugra (2004) believes as natural adaptation with a cross-border culture which "involves not only leaving social networks behind but also includes experiencing at first a sense of dislocation, alienation and isolation, which will lead to processes of acculturation" (129). Sam and Berry (2010) defined acculturation as a progression of cultural and psychological change resulting from contact between two different cultures. Aisha tries hard to live successfully in a different culture; to acculturate herself, but in vein. Neither can she be like them, nor did they accept her as member of their community.

Living and relating to two different countries and cultures, a *hybrid* who does not belong to either place; this is what Aisha conceives of herself

as an Egyptian living but unwelcomed in London as a foreign land. She develops an exilic identity in the transnational space she is dwelling in. Although, *hybridity* is becoming day by day a major feature of today's worldwide culture, and every culture is now defined as trans-cultural instead of mono-cultural (Welsch, 2008). Aisha does not seem to find a fitting place in England. The geographical and emotional exile that she experiences in England/London increases her weakness, and eventually drives her to expel herself from the public, never going to school afterward. "So, school was a disaster ... the white girls lived in a world of glamour to which I had no entrée. The black girls lived in a ghetto world of whisper and regarded me with suspicious dislike" (37). Neither world opens wide arms to embrace her, leaving her feel homeless and rejected. She is 'hovering on the outskirts of both'; rejected; having no entry, no access to either world. As an Arab Muslim immigrant woman, Aisha cannot grasp her real position in the host-country; a real loss; real alienation and displacement; while white girls regard her with unjustifiable disdain, black girls regard her with hostility.

Both stories represent concepts of home and exile; they make visible Arab immigrants' feelings of *rootlessness*. The sense of belonging is one important element of one's identity; therefore, losing it one loses his/her identity as a whole. A place of *exile* –as immigrants feel themselves living in -- could never turn out to be one's homeland, and nothing could really replace the psychological attachment to one's own lost homeland, one's place of origin. The effect of feeling of exile on all characters' mental health and identity is thus far hideous.

One learns a great deal of diaspora, hybridity and alienation through the protagonists Aisha and Sumra. They are described as *made to feel* having neither origins nor roots. Being the product of cross-cultural interactions, both stories' characters feel torn between a new diasporic reality, and emotional and spiritual nostalgia for their past life in their original homes. Homeland does not only represent a physical place or geographical territory they feel have been attached to but also a state of

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mind. These immigrant characters are mentally and emotionally anchored to the East.

Experiences of racism in the host land prove to be very harsh for the characters. Sumra's feeling of strangeness and exclusion is mingled—rather aggravated—with that of insecurity. Racism is what alerts and stimulates this feeling of jeopardy. Aisha, on her part, experiences scenes of ethnic discrimination from her British schoolmates. Her confrontation with Susan (a British classmate) further alienates her from the real world as she experiences a hard cultural shock. Although Aisha is a daughter of highly educated parents with an excellent standard of living; she could not enjoy a better fate. She too finds this very penalizing and painful; as an adolescent, she can no longer bear more humiliation and withdraws from school. Schwartz et al (2006) further demonstrates that young immigrants are at peculiar risk for such negative outcomes resulting from conflicts or encounters between adopting the new culture and maintaining a personal identity. They undergo what is called misrecognition by losing self-recognition which is too crucial for the development of one's identity. Aisha comes to realize that her schoolmates regard her as unfamiliar, strange and as belonging to elsewhere; whatever she does, they never accept her as *same*.

Rather serious was Ahdaf Soueif's and Aboulela's reconsideration of Western misconceptions of the East. Soueif puts forward the so many questions that govern the clash of cultures through a question-answer dialogue taking place between the Western Susan and Eastern Aisha; with Aisha defending her image which has been distorted from a Western perspective. Aboulela, on her part, refers to the misrepresentation of the Arabs through Majdy's remarks on the one hand and on Western Media on the other hand. "[Sudan] is not as bad as they make it to be true on TV..." (39). The ex-colonizers reproduce their ex-colonized's identity through the emerging practices of representation. Thus, Sumra—as a character—is employed to undermine prejudices and stereotypes inherent in Western perceptions of the Arabs. Another issue of no less importance than alienation and displacement is, hence, the confrontation of stereotypes by

Arab Muslim immigrants in the West. How to manage to preserve and maintain their faith, culture and identity undistorted in a full-of-prejudice environment is among the issues highlighted by both Aboulela and Soueif.

By mentioning Egypt in a reply by Aisha to a British classmate ‘Susan’ inquiring about her origins and nationality; and to Aisha’s great astonishment, a series of bombarding questions are darted at her by this mate.

- “That’s where they have those pharaohs and crocodiles...
d’ you go to school on a camel? This was accompanied by
a snicker...”

-“How many wives does your father have?”

-Oh, he doesn’t have ten, then?”

-“Do you have bags of money” (35-36/Aicha’s
answers are omitted)

These were the teasing questions of Susan in a dialogue gathering her with Aisha; where the Western stereotypes created against the East are summed up. Susan’s direct aim is to annoy her; however, she indirectly bespeaks critical illustrations of the Western vision of the Arabs. This scene stands as a cultural shock for Aisha in the host-land; but most important of all is that—as Said, E. (2003) asserts-- the exact image that the English --and the Europeans in general—hold about the Arabs.

Aisha does not find the host land as a hospitable space at all for her as a foreigner. Sumra finds it a rather hostile space that generates fear for her as a stranger. It is only when one make a link between the two stories *1964* and *The Ostrich* that they can make sense of Sumra’s fear and feelings of insecurity; it is through Aisha’s classmates’ stereotyped description of the East —in an attempt to bother her—that we come to grasp Sumra’s getting alarmed by seeing the insult mark on the wall of a mosque. This being the case, the two stories are complementary. *1964* provides cues of the stereotyped version of the East as it is produced by the West and that reflects notions of otherness and racism, *The Ostrich* portrays how Arab Muslim Immigrants feel panicked and insecure because of an unknown reason. Feeling of being *othered* and discriminated against is this unknown

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reason. In a foreign country, they bear new fear of being looked at as *others*. Discrimination is probably one of the reasons that lead Sumra to shy away from taking on their identity.

A rather interesting question may cross one's mind while discussing the feelings of *otherness* and *racism* against Arab immigrants is; what makes these people leave their homelands and endure rejection that give rise to feelings of insecurity and instability in a foreign space? Third World nations generally cross borders --for long or permanent residence-- for economic reasons, political upheaval or education purposes (Bhugra 2004); same reasons that drove Aisha, Majdy and his wife Sumra to immigrate to London. Aisha is a daughter to Egyptian academics who come to England on sabbatical to do Post-Doctorate Research. Sumra comes to England to accompany her husband who is doing his PhD there.

Aisha thinks she finally discovers her lost sense of belonging with some new British friends 'the Vicar's children'. She, at first, thinks to have finally been accepted as not-a- stranger when inviting her to their church. "I told myself it was nice that they thought nothing of taking me, a Muslim to their church. It was proof that I belonged –a little that I wasn't as different as I feared I was" (32). She is never to be accepted as such, nevertheless; a matter she discovers later, and which she considers the hardest blow she has ever had. She receives the word as the strongest slap on the face, *alien*. They consider her as one among those "alien races with alien beliefs ... there are some of those among us today" (32); as she overhears them speaking in their prayers, a speech that sounds so aggressive and bearing strong racism. They still consider her as a stranger of an alien race; their only reason to drive her to their own church has been to convert her to their own religion. By so doing, the Westerners initiate and nourish these Feelings of inferiority and subordination in them. "I felt excessively small and dark and was agonizingly conscious of my alien appearance..." (32). She starts to think her look is what introduces her as an alien. She also believes that her behaviors too make of her a misfit. "I was a misfit; I had the manners of fledging westernized bourgeois ..." (33). She blames herself for her alienation, her mis-fitness. Her experience with the Vicar's children

is not the only one for Aisha in London; “The Egyptian gets it every time. It takes someone from Africa to teach you your own language...” (37). This is Mrs. Braithwaite, Aisha’s British teacher, blaming her students for failing in scoring better than Aisha does at language test. Although her speech may sound as praise, it conveys a message conspicuously bearing the aspect of *racism* and *otherness*. The teacher is indeed angry that a foreigner –an Egyptian—proves herself smarter than her native peers. Furthermore, though Mrs. Braithwaite’s remarks pleased Aisha at first, it deeply hurts her later, for it reminds her of her being a *foreigner*, an alien, not having the right to excel at speaking their *own* language.

As Arabs, the characters are subject to fear of racism, which introduces a great gap between their aspirations and reality, and it is interpreted by their constant search and attempts for assimilation. The USA terrorist attack --of September 11, 2001-- has negatively influenced the Western racist discourses against the Arabs, in general, and Muslims, in particular; increasing what is commonly known as islamophobia. In a word, the already existing gap between the two worlds is only made noticeably overwhelming and more evident. “Majdy points out the graffiti for me, look, ‘Black Bastards’ on the wall of the mosque, Paki go home’ on the news agent’s door (...) I bear a new fear of not knowing who those enemies are. How would I recognize them while they can easily recognize me? (...) which one of them agrees with what’s written on the walls? (41). The writer appears to have brilliantly depicted the West’s racism against the Third World through this passage that accuses the British society of being a racist Islamophobic society. Sumra cannot help but discern her intrusion and expulsion; she feels ostracized and expelled. What even rises her fear is that she does not even figure out who her enemies are –who among the ones she is living with holds hatred and grudge against her, and what reasons make them hate her that strong.

Instead of a sense of belonging, they develop a sense of exclusion; the fact that makes them take refuge in their traditional past. ‘Nostalgia’ for Arab immigrants in *The Ostrich* supplies characters with an imaginary idealized memory of the past used to criticize and/or escape from the

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present. Sumra's identity crisis is revealed through her sudden shifts –as herself being the narrator of the story-- from one setting to another, from London to Khartoum. She is unable to take decisions as where to definitely setting herself; she still could not make up her mind. She can never totally eliminate or disregard her past; still keeping memories from her homeland, her social customs and cultural norms. It seems too difficult for her to forget her souvenirs in Sudan or cope with her new life in London. Their alienation is in part an outcome of leaving a socio-centric culture towards an ego-centric culture. "... at times I longed not to return to [London] that in Khartoum I felt everything was real and our life in London a hibernation" (53) in the host land, they are trying to assume the others' identity; a fact she recognizes she can never realize. Arab immigrants in London—according to Sumra—are feigning an identity that is not theirs; a fake one that makes them feel unoriginal, homeless, or rather not existing at all. Majdy too displays a fake identity; is always imitating the English, trying to model his identity on theirs. Aisha further demonstrates this notion when finally admitting that "[she] knew there was no hidden world, no secret society from which [she] was barred. *There was just nothing*" (44/My use of italics).

Once being uprooted from their place of origin, they could never be rooted in the present alien atmosphere. What society offers them does not meet with what they aspire to. They feel a misfit in the host land; as failures who whatever they do to fit in this new world, they cannot. They therefore end up in repositioning themselves in a world of imagination that transcends geographical and historical spaces. Aicha finds relief in daydreaming and communing with fictional characters she identifies herself with, like Emma Bovary, Maggie Tulliver and Anna Karenina; therefore, she creates a fictional classical British personality and identity that she can never take hold of or exhibit in reality. She embraces English traditional values only in her dreams. She tries to create an imaginary world of her own to escape from the harsh reality. Feeling alienated, she starts looking for her own world, whose inhabitants are fictional characters dwelling in the books she reads and in her mind alone. In this new world, she feels

herself at center of attention of everybody; she feels heroine herself. Through it, she creates a sense of belonging; escaping, hence, from some degree of alienation and marginalization, and eventually achieves a state of well-being. She also finds relief and entertainment in playing Jukebox at a café; “My secret bursts of life at the corner café sustained me” (39). Sumra, on her part, revives strength and feeds her present life on past memories in Sudan; making use of Sudanese traditional and religious values for her personal welfare. In this world of her own, she feels free, for her native customs no longer stand as a barrier against her self-development, where her origin, looks, and colour no more keep a source for disdain; where she can put an end for the psychological conflict arising inside her.

The contrapuntal position –as E. Said (1994) comes to refer to it in *Culture and Imperialism*—of these people is the outcome of the merging of two cultures; it is the counterpoint where the East and West meet. Home and host cultures –for most cases—intersect, if not clash. Diction used in the two stories—the integration of Arabic words in an English linguistic context-- is an illustration of how the two cultures converge. Aisha’s inability to carve out a place for herself in the middle of the cultural intersection is not due to her ignorance of the target culture or the foreign language, for she masters these later very well, but it is rather ascribed to her “conservative (Eastern) attitudes” (D’Alessandro 330). Her Easter and Muslim rules and regulations make her unable to settle herself in either culture.

E. Said (1994) confirms that “no one today is purely one thing” (201). Each proves possessing a hybrid self; indeed no one is original. This is because colonialism and Imperialism have left behind undeniable mark that massively influenced Third World nations’ cultures. In the same vein, 1964’s and The Ostrich’s characters’ identities are no longer the same as before, for continuous interactions with others. It is quite impossible that an individual –or even a society—drops their identity altogether and adopt a new, different, one. What else they are likely to do, nonetheless, is add up to their traditional one. Failing to achieve this state is what actually causes distress and crisis of identity.

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Women are seen "as the embodiment of their culture, for being the vivid representation of it in many aspects; from physical traits and their daily habit, to the considerable weight they carry in the family" (Feuerhna Gracia, 2020: 7). It is for this reason, perhaps, that both Aboulela and Soueif have intelligently chosen women as protagonists and their lives in their homelands, and even name their stories in accordance with the names of their protagonists (as the short story *Aisha*, *Zeina*...).

3. Conclusion:

Strong ties and nostalgia for the motherland make it difficult to assume a British Sudanese, or British Egyptian, or else British Arab identity; to inhabit a third space as Homi Bhabha (1990: 211) comes to call. This process rather activates symptoms of stress, depression, and physical pain, and cause notable unpropitious impact on psychological and physical welfare. Living in the shadow of diaspora, both Sumra and Aisha consider Britain as a place of exile; both recognize emotional attachment towards home/their countries of origin. They suffer estrangement agonies because of the cultural shock they encounter. All characters face racism and social rejection by the British, and both end up secluded at homes; Aisha, day long, in front of TV; and Sumra at windows watching strangers from a distance. Out of these two stories, Leila Aboulela's *The Ostrich* and Ahdaf Soueif's *1964*, one may grasp that the only place/setting that offers you happiness and security is the home; otherwise one will feel a stranger at others' homes.

When the second referral is made, only the previous personal meeting with the name and surname is satisfied.

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