

Teaching Leila Aboulela in the context of other authors across cultures: creative writing, the Third Culture Kid phenomenon and Africana womanism

Lily G. N. Mabura

American University of Sharjah, UAE

Born in the Sudanese capital of Khartoum in the 1960's to an Egyptian mother and a Sudanese father, Leila Aboulela moved to the United Kingdom to pursue further studies in Aberdeen, Scotland, where she was part of the UK's one million-plus Muslim community with members hailing from varied backgrounds in the Indian subcontinent, the Middle East, Chechnya, and Africa to mention but a few of the places. She presently lives and works in Doha, Qatar. She is the author of three novels, *The Translator* (1999), *Minaret* (2005), and *Lyrics Alley* (2010), as well as a collection of stories titled *Colored Lights* (2001).

This essay discusses creative writing and critical pedagogical insights gleaned from teaching the aforementioned works by Leila Aboulela in the context of other authors across cultures at the college level in the USA and the UAE, specifically at the University of Missouri-Columbia and the American University of Sharjah. It situates Aboulela's largely transnational fiction in relation to Africana womanism, the third culture kid phenomenon and its use as a tool for religious and cultural competency in an increasingly polarized post 9/11 world. It also addresses Aboulela's transgressive stance against the boundaries of gender, class, race, body-ability, and religion, among other factors, in a colonial and postcolonial setting.

Recent scholarship on Aboulela includes Barbara Cooper's "Everyday objects & translation: Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* and *Colored Lights*" (in Cooper, 2008). Here, Cooper discusses Aboulela's *The Translator* and mainly two stories from the collection *Colored Lights* – "The Museum" and "Colored Lights" – with the view that "Solid objects in Aboulela's fiction speak a coded and concrete language" and that material culture is "fundamental to the texture of life and the loss suffered by those who have to negotiate between diverse identities, religions and tongues" (p. 64). Cooper views Aboulela's emphasis on artifacts, such as those Shadia sees in "The Museum," as a criticism of the British empire and its explorers who only wanted "to benefit themselves" (Aboulela, 2001, p. 117) with Africa's raw materials under the façade of the benefits they purported to bring such as Christianity, commerce and civilization. In this manner, Cooper says, Aboulela "plays with the solid things of everyday life in order to explore the complex web woven around the interface between her different cultures and languages" (p. 63). Further, Cooper sees Aboulela as enacting "the effort of migration by carving out an English that absorbs traces of Arabic and [one that] is infused with Islam" (pp. 44-45). For Cooper, the "language that writers such as Aboulela are crafting has to be malleable in its function of depicting multiple cultures, experiences and spiritualities" (p. 48). Cooper (2009) also discusses the teaching of Aboulela's *The Translator*, with a focus on the immigrant experience.

This paper extends Cooper's work by viewing Aboulela and her fiction not only through a migrant and transnational lens, but also through the aforementioned lenses such as the third culture kid phenomenon and Africana womanism. This paper also shows Aboulela as equally critical of West-East imperialism, such as the British Empire in North Africa as discussed by Cooper, as she is of East-East imperialism and sometimes resultant racism/colorism, such as between Egypt and the Sudan in *Lyrics*

Alley. My reading and teaching of Aboulela's oeuvre takes into account North Africa's writing tradition, which according to scholars such as Talahite (2007) is "part of Arabic literature" and "determined by the sense of belonging to an Arab nation which shares the same language and culture, and to a certain extent, the same religion" (p. 38). However, I also highlight Aboulela's transnational narratives as often loaded with an exilic consciousness where the identity and subjectivity of her protagonists are influenced by Black Africa as much as by the Arab World, as protagonists confront issues of race and colorism in the midst of other intersecting oppressions. Additional recent scholarship on Aboulela includes Philips (2012), Abbas (2011), and Cariello (2009). This essay further broadens our understanding of Aboulela's work by focusing on pedagogical insights gleaned across cultures, an area of study that has yet to receive adequate attention in recent scholarship on the author.

For me, Aboulela is of particular pedagogical interest as a transnational writer, whose works are intriguing both from a creative writing fiction and scholarly perspective. I started reading Aboulela as part of my doctoral studies at the English Department, University of Missouri-Columbia in the United States. In the duration, I also used her work to teach in creative writing fiction classes where I assigned workshop participants in my *English 1510 – Introduction to Fiction* class, spring 2010, a short story titled "Majed" from *Colored Lights*. I thought that Aboulela's short story would bring a transnational, female, Arab-African and Islamic voice to the American classroom, while simultaneously showcasing a literary portrayal of the challenges facing Muslim immigrant students in the West—in this case, Hamid, a student in the UK struggling with his dissertation, blue-collar job dissatisfaction, budding alcoholism, interracial marriage to a white Muslim convert against the wishes of his family in Sudan, and guilt over loving his two biological children (Majed and his three-week baby) more than his two white step children. Apart from the issue of diversity of voice, I envisioned the use of Aboulela's short story as encouraging multi-cultural competence. Indeed, as Jawad and Benn (2003) claim, "There has never been a more important time to listen to the experiences of Muslim women living in the West" (p. 198). Through fiction, Aboulela tries to reveal the multifaceted spiritual and cultural dimensions of her characters in an age when the Islamic faith faces an almost unprecedented challenge from radical extremism within, while from without it is cast as the pariah of all religions.

In addition, I also used "Majed" to demonstrate the use of vertical versus horizontal movement in the short story form. Horizontal movement entails elements such as storyline, plot, and external action, while vertical movement entails aspects such as character development, flash back, flash forward, descriptions, and internal character actions. The theoretical basis for craft elements or techniques in this workshop came from Gardner (1991) and Crews (1999). "The Writer Who Plays with Pain: Harry Crews" particularly resonates with "Majed", where Hamid is plagued by pain and fear, stemming from the specter of past domestic abuse endured by his wife in a previous marriage and racial prejudice which he and his half-white children sometimes suffer from due to racial identification with Black Africa, as shown in the following passage:

When she [his wife] became Muslim she changed her name then left her husband. Robin and Sarah were not Hamid's children. Ruqiyyah had told Hamid horror stories about her previous marriage. She had left little out. When she went on about her ex-husband, Hamid felt shattered. He had never met Gavin (who wanted nothing to do with Ruqiyyah, Robin and Sarah and had never so much as sent them a bean), but that man stalked Hamid's nightmares. Among Hamid's many fears, was the fear of Gavin storming the flat, shaking him until his glasses fell off, "You filthy nigger, *stay away* from my family." (Aboulela, 2001, p. 108)

Pain and fear as fictional themes as well as sources of creativity recurred in documentaries accompanying workshop texts and shed light on writers' emotional lives during workshop discussions.

These accompanying documentaries included *Ernest Hemingway: Rivers to the Sea* (American Masters, 2005), which ends with Hemingway's suicide, and *The Rough South of Harry Crews* (Dir. Gary Hawkins, 1991), which discusses these themes (among others such as sharecropping poor whites and African-American presence) in Crews' life and writing. Additional short stories read in this workshop as a demonstration of various fiction techniques included "Waltzing the Cat" by Pam Houston, "The Summer Before the Summer of Love" by Marly Swick, and Ernest Hemingway's novella *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952).

I also taught *The Translator* (Aboulela, 1999) in *English 2159 – Introduction to World Literatures, 1890 to Present* (Theme: Transnational and Exiled Writers in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa and the Diaspora) in spring 2010 at the University of Missouri-Columbia. The main protagonist in this novel, Sammar, was born in Scotland while her parents (Sudanese nationals) were studying there and holds a British passport. She, her brother (Waleed), and their parents returned to Khartoum when she was seven. It is there that she met her cousins Tarig and Hanan, the children of her paternal aunt, Mahasen. She eventually marries Tarig, but claims that she loved his mother more than she did him. Sammar returns to Scotland once more with Tarig, who is studying medicine, and they have a son called Amir. Tarig dies in a car crash and Mahasen blames Sammar for his death because she believes Sammar pressured him to buy the car in the first place. When Sammar returns to Khartoum to bury Tarig, she agrees to marry Ahmad Ali Yasseen and become his third wife, because she needs a "focus." This makes Mahasen angrier as she sees Sammar as young, educated and able to make a living to support herself and her son despite being widowed. Unable and unwilling to mother Amir, Sammar returns to Aberdeen alone where she lives an ascetic life until a life-changing affair with the Scottish Rae Isles for whom she translates Arabic texts to English. Rae, who spent time in Morocco and Egypt in his younger years, is a twice-divorced Middle-East historian and lecturer in Third World politics at a university in Aberdeen. The novel comes to a close after Sammar's and Rae's wedding.

This course, ENG 2159, examined influential roles played by transnational and exiled writers from the late 19th century to present day in outlining and resisting – through the written word and personal activism – global violence emanating from race and religious difference. In regard to race- and religious-based violence, particular attention was paid to the emergence of the African Diaspora and subsequent imperialism in continental Africa. Participants¹ examined the prevailing global context, history, and nature/psychology of this violence as theorized on a cross-cultural and racial basis in *Frantz Fanon and the Psychology of Oppression* by Hussein Abdilahi Bulhan (1985, 2004) and used it as a lens to examine select works of fiction and nonfiction. Apart from the above novel by Aboulela, these works included select readings from *Southern Horrors and Other Writings: The Anti-Lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892-1900*, edited and introduced by Jacqueline Jones Royster (1997); *Out of Africa and Shadows on the Grass* (1937) by Isak Dinesen; and *The Last Will and Testament of Senhor da Silva Araújo* (1991, trans. 2004) by Germano Almeida. Accompanying documentaries included *Empires – Holy Warriors: Richard the Lion Heart & Saladin* (PBS, 2005), which historicized war and peace in Christian-Muslim relations in the Middle East. Course participants further addressed how race and religious difference, especially between Christians and Moslems, intersected to fuel violence in North Africa and the Western World in the colonial and postcolonial eras. An additional critical lens, which I recommended for the Aboulela reading, was *Muslim Women in the UK and beyond* (Jawad & Benn, 2003). Some of the main concerns discussed in this collection of essays are: Muslim women's rights; social conditions/aspects, including Islamophobia; sex/gender roles; experiences, needs and potential of new Muslim women in Britain; choice, opportunity, and women's careers; and life histories, identities, and citizenship.

When responding to *The Translator*, some UMC students were wary of adopting an unconscious Orientalist gaze and, therefore, hesitant to voice their readings of it. Rae, however, as a Western character who morphs into a cross-cultural and transnational figure, proved inspiring. In an effort to learn about the language and religion of non-Western societies in North Africa, he was seen as very much embodying Fanon's championing of cultural relativism in race relations. In this sense, the students were appreciative of the novel as a literary bridging of the East-West divide and saw it as a cross-cultural learning opportunity, especially after the tragic events of 9/11 in New York City, the London train bombings of 7/7, and the would-be bombings of 21/7. Fanon's views on the effects of structural violence in institutions (prisons, psychiatric hospitals, etc.), the imperial age, and slavery, complicated the analysis of violence in East-West relations as depicted in the novel and problematized the brief position Sammar took translating material from interrogation sessions of imprisoned terrorist suspects in Egypt. Documentaries such as *Empires* (2005) further historicized war/violence and the quest for peace across centuries between the East and the West. Of particular interest in *Empires*, especially in regard to cross-cultural marriage, was Western public outcry against the proposed marriage of Richard's divorced sister, Joanna, to al-Adil, Saladin's brother, in order to secure peace and the position of Christians in Jerusalem. The proposed marriage, which was in pursuit of peace and not love-based, did not take place, but course participants brought it up when discussing the marriage of Rae's uncle to an Egyptian woman, his uncle's subsequent conversion to Islam, and how his family consequently disowned him. The matter of Joanna and al-Adil was also brought up when discussing Sammar and Rae in the context of how much opposition the very idea of a cross-cultural marriage, regardless of whether it was based on war politics or love, generated in the private and public spheres of those involved across time. For example, Rae's family, based on his uncle's case, is not supportive, while Sammar's friend, Yasmin, who is also Rae's secretary, ardently warns her against the relationship saying, "If I were you, I'd avoid him like the plague [...]. Go home and maybe you'll meet someone normal, someone Sudanese like yourself. Mixed couples just don't look right, they irritate everyone" (Aboulela, 1999, p. 93). In addition to such prejudiced views on cross-cultural marriages, the Islamophobia facing Rae and Sammar, individually or as a couple, was a source of concern for course participants. In terms of Jawad and Benn's ideas, social conditions such as Islamophobia could have a negative impact on Sammar's and Rae's potential, careers, and life histories in the West.

However, on another level some UMC course participants were critical of Rae and Sammar's relationship, describing it as a disappointing, juvenile or adolescent-like romance. Sammar was characterized as prudish when she was embarrassed by holding hands with Rae, and some students were disappointed that they did not even kiss. The relationship was criticized for happening too much in the mind and not getting physical. Opposing views were simultaneously raised about Rae getting physical at all since he is a Middle-East historian and should know better, given that he also admires her veiling and Islamic spirituality.

I had also taught Aboulela's *The Translator* in a different class, *English 4420 – Africana Womanism* (Theme: Influential Roots to Contemporary Thought in the Diaspora and Continental Africa) the previous semester, fall 2009 at UMC. The main premise of the course was reading a selection of texts by authors such as Aboulela, Sojourner Truth, and Zora Neale Hurston using an Africana Womanism lens. The eighteen key features of an Africana Womanist discussed were: self-namer; self-definer; family-centered; in concert with males in struggle; flexible role player; whole and authentic; genuine in sisterhood; strong; adaptable; male compatible; respected and recognized; spiritual²; respectful of elders; adaptable; ambitious; and mothering and nurturing (Hudson-Weems, 2004). In the second half of *Africana Womanism*, Hudson-Weems analyzes various novels, including Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*

(1989). Bâ's novel, originally written in French, is set largely in an Islamic society in Senegal. I thought that assigning a different novel where transnationalism is more pronounced, such as Aboulela's, which is originally written in English and set in both an Islamic society in Sudan and a predominantly Christian Scotland, would further broaden the class' understanding of women of African-Arab descent and Islamic sensibilities both in continental Africa and the Diaspora. Select student responses to *The Translator* using an Africana womanist lens coalesced around Sammar. She was either criticized for her "need" of a male "focus" in her life or alternatively lauded as male compatible from an Africana womanist lens. In addition, she was praised for role flexibility, first as wife and mother and then as sole bread winner. Despite her long depression, Sammar was lauded for her physical and psychological strength, qualities of an Africana womanist, but concerns existed over her mothering/nurturing of Amir, who was largely raised by her mother-in-law after Tarig's death. Some students argued that leaving Amir with Mahasen was the right thing to do as she was not in a position to attend to him, while others argued she should have brought him back with her to Scotland and struggled to raise him right through her extended mourning.

After completing my studies at the University of Missouri-Columbia, I accepted a position in the English Department at the American University of Sharjah (AUS) in fall 2010. I found myself teaching Aboulela again, this time around within a Gulf context: a predominantly Muslim, but very diverse workshop in terms of race and nationality compared to previous workshops at the University of Missouri-Columbia that were predominantly white, American by nationality and with a largely Christian sensibility. My spring 2012 workshop, *English 301 – Creative Writing*, at AUS had course participants from the UAE, India, Pakistan, Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, Poland, Canada, and Saudi Arabia to name but a few. A significant number of these workshop participants are what Pollock & van Reken (2009) define as 'third culture kids' (TCKs). Sociologists John and Ruth Useem coined the term 'third culture' in the 1950's while doing research on Americans working in India. The early development of a TCK is shaped by an interstitial culture or a "culture between cultures," that is, between their current host culture or second culture (in this case, the UAE) and that of their parents or home culture (Useem, 1993, p. 1, cited in Pollock & van Reken, 2009, pp. 14-15). Adult TCKs' sense of identity and world view is impacted by their "internationally mobile childhoods" (Pollock & van Reken, 2009, pp. xi-xii). The term TCK has been further redefined as entailing a lifestyle that is " 'created, shared, and learned' by those who are from one culture and are in the process of relating to another" or even more simply to refer to "children who accompany their parents into another society" (personal communication from Ruth Hill Useem, cited in Pollock & van Reken, 2009, pp. 15-17). The term TCK itself falls under the broader category of the cross-cultural kid (CCK), a term coined by Pollock & van Reken (2009) to "include all children who for any reason had grown up deeply interacting with two or more cultural worlds during childhood [up to age 18]" (p. xiii; p. 31).

With the number of expatriates and their children in the UAE exceeding that of locals, inevitably young locals in their developmental years are increasingly steeped in the TCK interstitial culture. As such, local Emirati students in my workshop could also be classified as domestic third culture kids as they are largely "raised in a world between worlds in [their] own country" (Pollock & van Reken, 2009, p. 27).³ Apart from the TCK dynamic, where, for example, there is an Egyptian-American student whose family spends several years in Saudi Arabia before moving to the UAE, intercultural marriages (such as Emirati-Yemeni or Italian-Egyptian) were a significant feature in the family backgrounds of several workshop participants at AUS.

Many participants in the workshops termed Aboulela's fiction – the short story "Majed" and later the novel *Lyrics Alley* – as "very relatable", a sign of the shared TCK experience that marks Aboulela and her

fiction. Indeed, “Majed”, with its immigrant, intercultural, and rootlessness themes found strong resonance in the workshop. Rootlessness is a theme Aboulela also engages in the lead short story of her collection, “Colored Lights”, writing, “[t]he fate of our generation is separation, from our country or family. We are ready to go anywhere in search of the work we cannot find at home.” This nameless Muslim heroine finds herself steeped in what Aboulela terms the “sorrow of alienation” (Aboulela, 2001, p. 1), a context within which religion, in this case Islam, emerges as an increasingly important element of identity.

Indeed, according to Pollock & van Reken (2009), apart from TCKs embodying features of “being raised in a genuinely cross-cultural [and] highly mobile world,” these global nomads also see themselves as “representing something greater than themselves – be it their company, their government, or God” (pp. 17-18). Aboulela herself notes that her fiction “grows out of an acute sense of geographical and cultural displacement” (as cited in Sethi, 2005) that would have been unbearable were it not for the stabilizing effect that her religion, in this case Islam, provides.

System identity, under the auspices of Islam, emerged as a major feature in the AUS workshop. While in the UMC workshop in the United States Hamid might have been seen as tempering his pain, fear, and expectations with alcohol, his dalliance with it was generally frowned upon as *haram* in the AUS workshop. Along with this was a heightened disapproval of the Johnny Walker symbolism, portrayed as follows in Aboulela’s narrative:

Anything cheerful, not news, definitely not the news. The last thing he [Hamid] wanted at that time of the night were his brothers and sisters suffering in the West Bank. His own warm, private moments, the little man on the bottle of Johnny Walker. That little man was Johnny, an average sort of guy and because he was walking, striding along with his top hat, he was a Walker, Johnny Walker. Or perhaps because he was Johnny Walker, he was represented as walking, striding along happily. (Aboulela, 2001, p. 111)

In contrast to Hamid, his wife Ruqiyah received a positive appraisal for overcoming her pain and fear and embodying the characteristics of a believing Muslim, including her act of getting rid of Hamid’s stock of Johnny Walker by pouring it down the kitchen sink as the narrative comes to a close.

As with the UMC workshop in the US, pain and fear as fictional themes as well as sources of authorial creative spirit emerged during the discussion of texts and their accompanying documentaries, which included Janet Burroway et al.’s *Writing Fiction: A guide to Narrative Craft* (International Edition, 2011), Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *Chronicles of a Death Foretold* (1982, 2003), Isak Dinesen’s (pseudonym for Karen Blixen) *Shadows on the Grass* (1960), and the movie *Out of Africa* (Dir. Sydney Pollock, 1985). While Dinesen’s work is a memoir, I taught it to demonstrate a writer’s life, its inherent challenges and joys, and the influence of travel or place on the writer and their writing career, in this case the years Dinesen spent away from Denmark on her coffee farm at the foot of the Ngong Hills in Kenya. Notwithstanding postcolonial critiques of Dinesen’s work⁴, the memoir is an example of a literary intercultural foray as Dinesen engages with various ethnic cultures in what is present-day Kenya and also gets acquainted with Islam as practiced by Farah Aden, her Somali servant, who, together with her cook Kamante, played a central role in her farm life and, subsequently, her memoirs. Dinesen serves as an example of the outsider writing about other cultures (African) and religions (ethnic African religions and Islam), versus Aboulela, who comes from a relatively insider position in regard to both Africa and Islam. In addition, the workshop discussed how Dinesen uses atmosphere⁵ in her memoir *Shadows on the Grass*; how her writing is reflective of harmony or conflict between characters and place; and any correlation between place and emotion.

When teaching Dinesen at AUS, I also share photographs from my 2011 visits to both her museums in Nairobi, Kenya, and Rungsted, Denmark.⁶ My reflections on Dinesen have led me to believe that, as with Aboulela, she embodies the third culture kid phenomenon. She was raised in a highly mobile world, where family members such as her father and uncles came and went from distant foreign countries. Furthermore, in 1910, during her developmental years, she went to study art in Paris, ostensibly with Simon and Menard, but admittedly only did a little of that as the “impact of Paris was too great” (Dinesen, as cited in Walter, 1956). She also traveled often during this period, staying, for example, in 1912 with a cousin who was married to the Danish Ambassador in Rome (Walter, 1956). Africa then was far from her mind, but I perceive her as already exhibiting characteristics of the third culture kid phenomenon, including a system identity in regard to the relevance of God in her life as shown in the following statement in a *Paris Review* interview with Eugene Walter (1956): “When I was a young girl, it was very far from my thoughts to go to Africa, nor did I dream then that an African farm should be the place in which I should be perfectly happy. That goes to prove that God has a greater and finer power of imagination than we have.” When Dinesen returned to Denmark for good, material culture from East Africa retained a physical presence in her home. The wall behind her writing desk, for example, was decorated with spears, wooden clubs, an assortment of hunting knives, and two leather shields. There were also several wood carvings, a beaded wooden stool, and photographs of loved ones such as Kamante and Denys Finch-Hatton in the study, forming what I perceive to be an intercultural writing space (a world between worlds) declaratively created by an adult TCK writer using material culture from East Africa in Denmark. Other objects in the Rungstedlund museum include a wooden Zanzibar chest gifted to her by Farah Aden, a decorated wooden screen, and several pieces of artwork among other things.

Viewing Dinesen through a third culture kid lens could also add a dimension to the emotional generosity displayed towards her by Ernest Hemingway (who can also be envisioned as a third culture kid due the time he spent overseas in Europe during his developmental years). In an interview, Hemingway is on record as fondly remarking that “[a]s a Nobel Prize winner I cannot but regret that the award was never given to Mark Twain, nor to Henry James, speaking only of my own countrymen. Greater writers than these also did not receive the prize. I would have been happy – happier – today if the prize had gone to that beautiful writer Isak Dinesen ...” (cited in Breit, 1954). A sense of a shared culture and connections between ATCK (adult third culture kid) writers, however seemingly minor, warrants attention in order to gain an even broader understanding of the third culture kids, who have been described as the “prototype citizens of the future” (Ted Ward, as cited in Pollock & van Reken, 2009, p. xiii). Indeed, ATCK writers and the overwhelming presence of TCK students in countries such as the UAE are of pedagogical interest to instructors in the region. Needless to say, the TCK phenomenon is growing globally and scholars such as Pollock & van Reken (2009) have noted its emerging presence even in the public scene, where several world leaders such as President Obama and a number of his senior administrators such as Timothy Geithner, Valerie Garret, and James L. Jones are ATCKs whose sense of identity and world views are shaped by an internationally mobile childhood. As such, the third culture kid phenomenon and writing between worlds emerges as a significant pedagogical point to make in the cases of writers such as Aboulela, Dinesen, and Hemingway. I perceive these ATCK writers and their writing within an interstitial culture as a metaphorical bridge between the very worlds they occupy. Thus, Aboulela’s contemporary work speaks across time and space to Northern Africa, the UK, the Gulf, and, indeed, to the larger global audience in similar TCK fashion as Dinesen’s and Hemingway’s. In this vein, I reflect back with poignancy to a little white wooden bridge across a backyard pond in Dinesen’s home, now Rungstedlund museum, as embodying the very metaphor of the ATCK writer as a transhistorical literary intercultural bridge.

Course participants in ENG 301, spring 2012, at AUS also had the choice of reading Aboulela's novel *Lyrics Alley* or Marquez's *Chronicles of a Death Foretold* for further insights in regard to fiction craft elements as they strove towards producing two short stories for the workshop process and revising one of them for their final⁷. Guidelines for the Aboulela review⁸ included reading "The Tower and the Net: Story Form, Plot and Structure," Chapter 7, *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft* (International Edition) by Janet Burroway, Elizabeth Stuckey-French, and Ned Stuckey-French (2011) and briefly commenting on the following fiction craft techniques in relation to *Lyrics Alley*: key elements of the story form as outlined in Burroway (conflict, a series of complications, a crisis, falling action, and resolution); how "power," as discussed in Burroway, is constructed among Aboulela's characters; the patterns of connection and disconnection that select Aboulela characters exhibit in *Lyrics Alley*; what fiction writers gain from Aboulela/her writing and how to implement fiction writing tips/techniques from Aboulela in the short stories for the workshop.

One of the major workshop discussion points of *Lyrics Alley* included the alternating, chapter-by-chapter narration between the Sudanese Abuzeid dynasty patriarch, Mohamoud Bey; his children's private tutor from Egypt, Ustaz Badr, who in addition to educating the Sudanese population wishes Egypt had more time as an imperial power to spread Islam as well; Nur, Mohamoud Bey's second-born son, who is the presumed heir until a sea diving accident in Alexandria, Egypt, which leaves him paralyzed from the neck down; Soraya, Nur's first cousin and fiancée, who ends up marrying his best friend Tuf Tuf as well as pursuing her dream to be a medical doctor; and Nabilah, Mohamoud Bey's second younger, urbane wife, who sees Egypt, her homeland, as representing everything civilized as opposed to Sudan. Workshop participants highlighted the familiarity of regional themes, some of them controversial, which are tackled by Aboulela in this novel such as polygamy, female circumcision, cousin marriages, colorism, and colonialism/imperialism (both by the West/England *vis-à-vis* Egypt and Sudan and by the East/Egypt *vis-à-vis* Sudan). The forced circumcision of Nabilah's daughter, Ferial, by her senior Sudanese co-wife, Waheeba, not only drew a lot of negative criticism, but also opened up a window of possibility in terms of taboo subjects workshop participants could freely explore in their own fiction. Ferial's brother, Farouk, occasionally a victim of colorism when he visited Cairo with his mother due to his darker skin and hair type, also drew the workshop's attention to the issue of race in North Africa. In regard to an increased willingness to explore taboo subjects, one [TCK] student, for example, wrote a short story titled "The Mirror in Her Room," about a teenage girl's body image issues and anorexia in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Another [TCK] student, in emulation of Aboulela's alternating narration, wrote a transnational short story, in similar form, which was set in Lebanon and the UAE and titled "The Importance of Being Married".

I also taught *Lyrics Alley* at the American University of Sharjah in *English 203 – Writing About Literature* in spring 2012. Course participants were required to read the novel using one or multiple intersecting critical insights gleaned from Leila Ahmed's *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992) and Angela Y. Davis' *Women, Culture & Politics* (1984, 1989) in regard to feminist and [post]colonial concerns and the discourse of the veil. I placed particular emphasis on the status of women, from pre-Islamic times to present-day, as discussed in Ahmed (1992), and how this informs our reading of the female characters in Aboulela's novel, such as Soraya, Nabilah and Waheeba, as they deal with issues such as women's access to basic and further education in a colonial and Islamic setting; marriage – including love marriages, arranged marriages, cousin marriages, and polygamous marriages; female circumcision; and social attitudes towards women's work outside the domestic sphere amongst other issues. Additional texts read in this class included Anna Deavere Smith's *Fires in the Mirror* (1993) and Jean Said Makdisi's *Beirut Fragments: A War Memoir* (1990). Select accompanying documentaries/videos included Smith on

“Art and Politics” and on “The Artist’s Voice for Social Change,” which are available via YouTube; Davis on “Women, Privilege and Prisons,” also available via YouTube; and by popular student demand, the just-released and widely-acclaimed movie *The Help* (Dir. Tate Taylor, 2012) as an accompaniment to Davis on women, race, and class issues in the USA. Upon completion of the course, participants were able to do the following to varying degrees: examine how artists and critics use their voice as a tool for social and intellectual change; critically discuss politically and socially conscious art; demonstrate basic knowledge of the discourse of the veil; analyze, contextualize, and historicize inter and intra-community literary relations in the U.S., the “Middle East,” and Africa with race, gender, religion, age, body-ability, and education/occupation in mind; identify how writers blur or challenge traditional genre boundaries and produce new/experimental subversive forms such as documentary or journalistic theatre/drama, ethnographic-theatre, testimony plays, poetic drama, etc.; and evaluate art and an artist’s life in a time of war and the nuclear arms race.⁹

As in the previous course, discussion focused partly on the risks Aboulela takes as a politically and socially conscious writer by addressing taboo and controversial topics such as female circumcision, polygamy, and women’s education. She is very much in line with Davis, who also addresses a selection of these very issues in the USA, Africa, and the Islamic world. Within this context, Aboulela’s writing emerges as transgressive and at times even strikes an activist’s note. When considered alongside Smith, who blurs genres in the poetic documentary-drama *Fires in the Mirror*, we see Aboulela making a case for poetry both within her fictional world in *Lyrics Alley* and the very Sudanese society, which shuns Nur’s secular and at times romantic poetry (odes to his beloved Soraya or painful exposés of his paralysis and eventual loss of Soraya). As in previous works by Aboulela, the themes of pain and fear find profound resonance in Nur’s poetry and tragic condition. Pain, fear, and the loss of personal dignity are also central to Makdisi’s war memoir, *Beirut Fragments*. Further, lamenting the death of her brother Edward Said, Makdisi notes, “We have all been terribly lazy. [...] ‘Let Edward do the talking, let Edward do the thinking’; Edward is dead now and we must think for ourselves, and it is hard. But it is important that we all have the kind of courage that he had” (as cited in Stigset, 2011); seen in this light, Aboulela, like Makdisi herself, seems to be carrying on the regional baton for literary courage in the post Edward Said era as her writing can be read as a tool for social and intellectual change.

As with past works by Aboulela, the CCK and TCK phenomena also emerge in *Lyrics Alley*. Mohamoud Bey, the family patriarch, is an adult cross-cultural kid, who grew up and forged his business between Sudan and Egypt. More specifically, he is a borderlander, who constantly works and lives across national boundaries. His son Nur, who crosses national boundaries in pursuit of an elite English education in Alexandria, Egypt, is also a borderlander. Ferial and Farouk, on the other hand, are TCKs born into the bi-cultural/racial marriage of their borderlander father and Egyptian mother, Nabilah. They are raised in a highly mobile world, as their father comes and goes, and they also sometimes come into contact with elite and highly mobile family acquaintances, who might include colonial era (A)TCKs and other (A)CCKs in general such as trading partners, bankers, and administrative officials. Their modern household is also adjacent to that of their father’s first wife—Hajjah Waheeba’s traditional Sudanese *hoash*. Occasions such as Mohamoud Bey’s illness at the beginning of the novel, family functions such as weddings, and Nur’s subsequent paralysis entails closer interaction with Waheeba’s household than Nabilah desires. Even though Nabilah reluctantly admires Waheeba’s *hoash* for its cleanliness and white fabrics, she decries some Sudanese customs such as receiving guests in the bedroom – as happened during Mohamoud Bey’s illness – or the presence of beds and bed-like furniture in living rooms and other public spaces in the *hoash*. At times, it seems that her rivalry with Waheeba in the polygamous household arrests her ability to learn more about Sudanese customs and essentially poisons a domestic

cultural contact zone where TCKs and CCKs such as Ferial, Farouk, and Nur might thrive and explanations for the presence of material cultural items such as beds/bed-like furniture, which irritate Nabilah, might be provided. As a matter of fact, it was an impromptu coffee-station chat with a colleague of mine from the AUS English Department, Dr. Aisha Mohamed-Sayidina, who is a Canadian of Sudanese descent, about African hospitality in general that shed light on the matter. Dr. Mohamed-Sayidina said beds/bed-like furniture was a customary feature in a traditional Sudanese reception room, with the bed signifying the very essence of traditional hospitality, intimating that guests were not only welcome upon arrival, but could even sleep over and stay on for a couple of days, if they so desired or the occasion demanded. I shared this information with the class as discussion of the novel progressed to Ferial's forceful circumcision in Waheeba's *hoash* when Nabilah was out of the compound. While many course participants acknowledged that Waheeba was probably following the dictates of tradition by circumcising Ferial and one of her granddaughters, others cited probable malice stemming from the polygamous household and the frustrations of Nur's paralysis as Nabilah had openly opposed the circumcision of her daughter and even gotten Mohamoud Bey to warn Waheeba against its practice in the household. The complexities of polygamy as practiced by Mohamoud Bey were also discussed in contrast to other forms of polygamy such as matrilineal uxori-local polygamy that were practiced in the pre-Islamic Arab world as outlined in Leila Ahmed (1992). Indeed, Nabilah's constant quest to be housed in a separate and distant villa, preferably in Cairo where her mother and grandmother live, conforms to a matrilineal uxori-local polygamous arrangement where women would reside with their respective families/tribes, leaving the husband to visit each sequentially and, thus, possibly avoid or reduce the kind of tensions emanating from the Bey household as depicted in *Lyrics Alley*.

As the novel comes to a close, the position of TCKs and CCKs such as Ferial, Farouk, and Nur remains fraught. Nur, despite gaining fame, success and new friends due to his burgeoning poetic talents, remains plagued by serious health and psychological complications stemming from his paralysis. Farouk, despite transcending birth order to become the new heir of the Abuzeid dynasty, is faced with alienation both in Sudan and Egypt. And, finally, Ferial, despite retaining her mother's light complexion and straight hair and thus avoiding possible colorism issues in Egypt, remains forever marked by female circumcision. It is in this way, therefore, that Aboulela's *Lyrics Alley* further broadens our understanding of TCKs, and CCKs in general, by highlighting the complex and sometimes problematic position they occupy in a literary form.

In the previous semester, fall 2011, at AUS, I had had the opportunity of teaching Aboulela's first novel, *The Translator*, which I had also taught in the USA at the University of Missouri-Columbia. As with other classes at AUS, and in contrast with UMC as already explained, a significant if not overwhelming number of course participants in English 315 (*East Meets West: Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters*) were TCKs. In addition to Aboulela, other assigned texts for this class were *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil's Resurgence from the Middle East to America (2011)* by Leila Ahmed; *The Nawal El Saadawi Reader (1997)*; *Beirut Fragments: A War Memoir (1990)* by Jean Said Makdisi; and *The Namesake (2004)* by Jhumpa Lahiri. This material was also supplemented by documentaries and online video interviews by Leila Ahmed and Nawal El Saadawi.

Redacted course outcomes for English 315 included analyzing how transmigration blurs the East-West divide in the assigned literary works; demonstrating knowledge of traditional socio-cultural norms related to veiling; critically discussing East-West exilic consciousness and home-coming in regard to identity and identification across the generational gap within a literary context; analyzing and historicizing the woman question in East-West discourse; making feminist sense of East-West conflict

zones; and examining the intersecting implications of race/ethnicity, nationality, religion, age, and gender in East-West relations within a literary context.

In select responses to *The Translator*, students noted that the novel not only speaks to a Western audience, but to them in the East as well, highlighting themes such as cousin marriage (Tarig-Sammar), which exist in the region. As in the USA, the Islamophobia facing Rae and Sammar was a source of concern. Here in the UAE, however, it is more personalized: AUS TCKs who are visibly Muslim realize they could be potential targets of rising Islamophobia in the West despite their simultaneous allegiance to multiple cultures, including Western ones. One student wrote an essay titled “My Dream is to go to the USA Wearing my Hijab,” which personalized the veil’s discourse as discussed in El-Saadawi (1997) and Ahmed (2011) within the context of rising Islamophobia in international travel and the USA, based on her own experience and that of her family. Again, as in the USA, Sammar was criticized by some AUS students for her “need” of a man or alternatively lauded as male compatible. In AUS TCK student culture, however, Sammar’s “need” for a man received more scrutiny from a gendered Eastern and Islamic perspective. Course participants highlighted the difference between a woman needing a man within a Western context versus living in an Eastern context/world constructed along these gendered lines where a man might be required or necessary to serve as an escort outside the home, as a signatory of official paperwork, etc. In addition, the literary politics of marriage to non-Muslim men and women within the Abrahamic faiths (al *kitabiyya* – “People of the Book”) and without emerged as a major discussion point, especially when juxtaposed against the TCK background where interfaith, cross-cultural and multi-racial marriages are frequent. Within this TCK culture, where the boundaries between the East and the West are blurred and fluid, Sammar and Rae’s relationship often found a sympathetic audience, which countered more conservative concerns that their inter-faith relationship was *haram* or forbidden in Islam. Rae does, eventually, say the *Shahadah* and marry Sammar, but he is not a Muslim for the larger part of their courtship, which was a major source of concern for those who believed that Sammar was straying beyond the confines of ‘*halal*-dating’ and further alienating herself from Islamic friends/society with whom she shared an exilic consciousness and collective sense of identity.

Beyond “Majed” from *Colored Lights*, *The Translator* and *Lyrics Alley*, I also taught Aboulela’s *Minaret* in *English 210 – Introduction to Literature* (Theme: Women’s Literatures, 1850-Present) in fall 2010 when I first arrived at the American University of Sharjah. Accompanying texts used in the course included: *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth*: Dictated by Sojourner Truth (ca.1797-1883), edited by Olive Gilbert, 1850; *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) by Zora Neale Hurston; *Out of Africa* (1937) by Isak Dinesen; and *Do They Hear You When You Cry* by Fauziya Kassindja and Layli Bashir (1999). Accompanying critical material included “Race, Work, and Literary Authority in *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth*,” *Belabored Professions Narratives of African American Working Womanhood* by Xiomara Santamarina (2005); excerpts from *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves* (2004) by Clenora Hudson-Weems; Frantz Fanon’s “Pitfalls of National Consciousness” from *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961, 1965); select essays from *Muslim Women in the United Kingdom and Beyond: Experiences and Images* edited by Haifaa Jawad and Tansin Benn (2003); and “Female Genital Mutilation: The Modern Day Struggle to Eradicate a Torturous Rite of Passage” by Robin M. Maher (1996).

Redacted course outcomes for this course were as follows: analyzing the literary characterization of women from various backgrounds such as in [post]colonial Africa, the Arab world, and, in Western exile; examining how women writers, across the centuries, have used the pen as a weapon against various oppressions; identifying intersecting oppressions facing women due to their race, gender, class, traditional cultures, and religion; and demonstrating the influence that the personal lives and circumstances of women writers have on their literary work and production.

Select student responses centered on Najwa, the novel's heroine, through a Fanonian and Africana womanist lens. Najwa is an aristocrat through her mother's family, which had "a long history of acres of land and support for the British and hotels in the capital and bank accounts abroad" (Aboulela, 2005, p. 38). Her father is depicted as a corrupt government official presumably under then President Gaafar al-Nimeiri, who was in office between 1969 and 1985. Described as ambitious, Najwa's father "moved from a humble background to become manager of the President's office via marriage" to a divorced aristocrat no one else would have (Aboulela, 2005, p. 8, p.145). His dubious Treasury deals aside, he is cast as a loving spouse and liberal father in regard to the upbringing of his children. This is demonstrated in Najwa's early secular lifestyle and relationships. Her love interest at the University of Khartoum, Anwar Al-Sir, is a member of the Democratic Front, the students' branch of the Communist Party, and a vocal critic of her father and Sudan's bourgeoisie in general which he blames for the current chaos in the country (Aboulela, 2005, p. 11). Existence for this aristocratic Westernized Sudanese heroine, as Najwa is portrayed at the beginning of the novel, takes a turn for the worse when her father's government is overthrown and a new regime, supported by the Democratic Front, takes power. Najwa finds herself exiled in London with her mother and her spoilt fraternal twin and brother, Omar, while her father is found guilty on charges of corruption and is hanged in the Sudan. Later on, her broken-hearted mother dies from cancer while Omar is imprisoned for selling drugs and stabbing an undercover policeman.

Viewed through a Fanonian lens, Najwa is a family product of the very national bourgeoisie that Fanon was critical of for their "spiritual penury," including trying to get rich under new postcolonial leadership using corrupt means; for not taking progressive risks with their lands to improve agricultural output in order to feed populations in marginalized areas or offer job opportunities for an idle youth "that was prey to all sorts of disintegrating influences"; of lacking a connection with the poor masses of their country and not using their education to raise their consciousness; of not crafting an innovative economic agenda, via the political parties they controlled, which could industrialize the country; and of stashing their wealth overseas in the very Western nations that had exploited them in the colonial era instead of investing it in the underdeveloped home economies they had defrauded (Fanon, 1961, 1965).

Despite being a member of this class, Najwa was seen by students to eventually redeem herself via an Africana womanist lens by her growing spiritual awareness; selflessly nurturing her mother through her illness; staying on in London instead of relocating to Canada with her uncle so that she could remain close to Omar and visit him in prison; and developing psychological strength to cope with the Islamophobia, racism, classicism, and exilic alienation she faced in living alone in London practically penniless due to her mother's hospital bills and money she had spent on a doomed relationship with Anwar when he was eventually exiled himself.

Najwa meets Tamer, an Egyptian undergraduate, in 2003 after about eighteen years of political exile in London when she begins working for his elder sister Lamya, who is pursuing a PhD and raising a daughter, Mai, who needs babysitting. She is in her mid-thirties and "old enough to be his mother" (Aboulela, 2005, p. 263). Tamer, like Najwa, however, is a TCK. Theirs is an unlikely love story and in true TCK form, the relationship transgresses conservative Islamic courtship rituals when they, for example, kiss. While some UMC students had decried the lack of kissing in Rae's/Sammar's romance in *The Translator*, some AUS students were concerned about its presence in the Tamer-Najwa romance in *Minaret*, saying that they did not see it coming; that it was not acceptable and a good Muslim would not do it; that they were surprised that Tamer and Najwa went there; or that Tamer and Najwa went against their faith or had not yet attained the spiritual purity they sought. As TCKs living in London, however, Najwa's and Tamer's view of the kiss was obviously influenced by Western courtship rituals, and it is not surprising that other AUS students in the course, largely TCKs themselves, did not seem taken aback by

this kiss or by all the other lines that the relationship crosses including those associated with age, class, or color difference. In the novel, Najwa's and Tamer's relationship faces massive opposition from Lamya and Dr. Zeinab, his mother. While Dr. Zeinab's conceit is based on not wanting her teenage son to marry a thirty-year-old maid, Lamya's is laced with class and racial prejudice. Najwa says, "She will always see my hijab, my dependence on the salary she gives me, my skin colour, which is a shade darker than hers" (Aboulela, 2005, p. 116). Najwa eventually gives up Tamer and continues on her spiritual journey, a pilgrimage to Mecca, but leaves behind the echo of a transgressive TCK relationship that generates critical inquiry in the classroom.

In conclusion, teaching Aboulela in the context of other authors across cultures yields a multiple array of interesting insights. As previously discussed, her fiction can be read using different critical lenses that range from Africana womanism to Fanonian thought in a colonial and postcolonial context, the third culture kid phenomenon, to intertextuality in relation to other authors across time. More broadly, her fiction can be taught under a 'teaching to transgress' banner against the boundaries of gender, class, race, body-ability, and religion among others. Finally, in Aboulela we see an exemplum of literature as a tool for religious and cultural competence in the 21st Century from both a creative writing and a critical perspective across cultures.

References

- Abbas, S. (2011). Leila Aboulela , religion, and the challenge of the novel. *Contemporary Literature*, 52(3), 430-461.
- Aboulela, L. (1999). *The Translator*. New York, NY: Black Cat a paperback original imprint of Grove/Atlantic, Inc.
- Aboulela, L. (2001). *Colored lights*. Edinburgh, UK: Polygon.
- Aboulela, L. (2005). *Minaret*. New York, NY: Black Cat, a paperback original imprint of Grove/Atlantic, Inc.
- Aboulela, L. (2010). *Lyrics Alley*. New York, NY: Grove Press, an imprint of Grove/Atlantic, Inc.
- Ahmed, L. (2011). *A quiet revolution: the veil's resurgence from the Middle East to America*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Breit, H. (1954). The sun also rises in Stockholm. *The New York Times on the Web*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/07/04/specials/hemingway-stockholm>
- Burroway, J., Stuckey-Finch, E., and Stuckey-Finch, N. (2011). *Writing Fiction: A guide to narrative craft* (International edition). Boston: Pearson-Longman.
- Cariello, M. (2009). Searching for room to move: producing and negotiating space in Leila Aboulela 's *Minaret*. In L. Al Maleh (Ed.), *Arab voices in diaspora: critical perspectives on Anglophone Arab literature* (pp. 339-350). Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Cooper, B. (2008). *A New Generation of African Writers: Migration, Material Culture and Language*. London: James Currey.
- Cooper, B. (2009). Language, multiple worlds, and material culture in the teaching of African migrant fiction. In G. Desai (Ed.), *Teaching the African Novel* (pp. 246-58). New York, NY: Modern Language Association of America.

- Crews, H. (1999). *Getting naked with Harry Crews: interviews* (Erick Bledsoe, Ed.). Gainesville, FL: University of Florida.
- El Saadawi, N. (1997). *The Nawal El Saadawi reader*. New York: Zed Books.
- Gardner, J. (1991). *The art of fiction: notes on craft for young writers*. New York: Vintage.
- Hudson-Weems, C. (2004). *Africana womanism: reclaiming ourselves*. Boston and New York: Bedford Publishers
- Jawad, H. & Benn T. (Eds.) (2003). *Muslim Women in the United Kingdom and beyond: experiences and images*. Leiden; Boston: Brill.
- Philips, C. (2012). Leila Aboulela 's *The Translator*: reading Islam in the West. *Wasafiri: The Magazine of International Contemporary Writing*, 69, 66-72.
- Pollock, D. C. and van Reken, R. E. (Revised Edition, 2009). *Third culture kids: growing up among worlds*. Boston, MA: Nicholas Brealey.
- Sethi, A. (2005, June 5). *Keep the faith*. Accessed 20 August 2012 at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/jun/05/fiction.features2>
- Stigset, M. (2011). Jean Makdisi: Our strength lies in the simplicity of truth. *The Daily Star – Lebanon*. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/ArticlePrint.aspx?id=91786>
- Tahalite, A. (2007). North African Writing. In Olaniyan, T. and Quayson, A. (Eds.) *African literature: an anthology of criticism and theory*. Victoria, Australia: Blackwell Publishing (pp. 38-45).
- Useem, R. H. (January 1993). Third Culture Kids: Focus of Major Study. *Newslinks, Newspaper of the International School Services*, 12 (3), 1.

¹ These students were predominantly white, American by nationality, and with a largely Christian sensibility.

² Spirituality here was not specific to a particular religion: characters with Christian, Islamic, or other sensibilities were discussed in relation to their peculiar beliefs.

³ Cf. the case of Jennifer, a girl from Toronto, Canada, raised in a Native American reservation where her parents taught (Pollock & van Reken, 2009).

⁴ See, for example, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (1993) essay, "Her Cook, Her Dog: Karen Blixen's Africa," *Moving the Center: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*.

⁵ This includes both the setting of the story (locale, weather and time) and its tone (Burroway et al., 2011).

⁶ My November 2011 visit to the Karen Blixen Museum in Rungsted, Denmark, was partly funded by an AUS Seed Grant.

⁷ The fiction workshop at the University of Missouri-Columbia also required participants to write two short stories (10-15 pages) and then revise one of them for their final (15-20 pages).

⁸ The Marquez review had similar guidelines as the Aboulela review in relation to the Burroway text.

⁹ This is a select list of course outcomes relevant to this paper.