

Faith, Identity and Magical Realism in Leila Aboulela's *Bird Summons*

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ABSTRACT

This article adopts a literary analytical approach to illuminate the use of magical realism in the contemporary Anglophone Arab narrative of Leila Aboulela's *Bird Summons* (2019). The study follows a methodology which combines two critical approaches to magical realism: first, a textual approach, and then a contextual one. Accordingly, the study uses key magical realist elements in *Bird Summons* to delineate the poetics of magical realism within the narrative, before determining the context in which magical realism functions in the narrative. Simultaneously, the study benefits from Christopher Warnes's two strands of magical realism, 'faith-based magical realism' and 'irreverent magical realism' in providing a coherent basis for the use of magical realism in the text. This study aims at examining the significance of the magical realist narrative in articulating Arab British identity in *Bird Summons*. The analysis will interpret the role of magical realism in conveying and undermining the dominant ethnic and racial discourses which shape Arab British identities in Britain. The study's findings demonstrate how the use of magical realism in the examined Anglophone Arab novel reinforces the fictional purposes of Aboulela as a hyphenated Arab, as it allows her to undermine dominant discourses on hyphenated Arab identities. At the same time, the use of magical realism allows Aboulela to (re)construct Arab British identities within her novel, apart from essentialist views of identity.

INTRODUCTION

The present study investigates the function of magical realism in negotiating Arab diasporic identities in Arab British novelist Leila Aboulela's *Bird Summons* (2019). The study considers a magical realist analytical approach to Aboulela's novel as to examine the expression of Arab British identity in it. To these ends, the study mainly relies on key magical realist occurrences in *Bird Summons*. Using these occurrences as material for analysis, the study defines the nature of the 'magic' and the 'real' in terms of the text. Then, employing these same occurrences, the study investigates the functions of magical realism in negotiating and expressing cultural and/or religious identities within the context of Arab British diaspora.

Taking into account both the "critical uncertainty" (Warnes 1) about the definitions of magical realism and the "critical dead ends" (ibid 7) in approaches to the genre, this study follows a methodology which combines two critical approaches proposed by Eva Aldea in *Magical Realism and Deleuze* and Christopher Warnes in *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel*. The approaches of both Aldea and Warnes coincide in emphasizing a textual approach which defines magical realism in terms of a given literary text before applying any contextual approach to that text. As such, the study allows the theory of magical realism to emerge from

the examined novel, rather than imposing it onto it (ibid); first, the study defines magical realism within the novel, and then, it examines the function of magical realism within the novel's context. Ultimately, the study will attempt to distinguish between Warnes's 'faith-based magical realism' and 'irreverent magical realism' within Aboulela's novel. Nonetheless, such distinction does not aim to confine the analysis but rather aims to assume Warnes's outlook in generating a "productive exercise" which allows an interpretation of magical realism beyond critical distortions (ibid 17).

Magical Realism

Taking into consideration the inevitable confusion concerning the term 'Magical Realism,' this account delineates the historical development of the term in the general sense. Most critics agree that the first use of the term 'Magical Realism' took place in 1925 in an article by the German critic Franz Roh on a Post-Expressionist painting. In its turn, Roh's article influenced Alejo Carpentier's development of the Latin American concept 'lo real maravilloso,' which translates into 'marvelous realism' (Aldea 2). Stephen M. Hart, in "Magical Realism: Style and Substance," depicts the development of magical realism from a dominant feature in the Boom Literature of Latin America in the 1960s, to an international phenomenon

when Homi Bhabha defined it as “the literary language of the emergent postcolonial world” in the 1990s (qtd. in Hart 1).

Wendy B. Faris (2004) deals with magical realism as an international “mode of expression” which offers “literary ground” for “cultural work” (Faris 1). She defines magical realism as a combination of ‘realism’ and ‘the fantastic’ in which the distinction between the ‘marvelous’ and the ‘ordinary’ is blurred (ibid). Faris recognizes the intersection of magical realism with postmodernism and postcolonialism as it challenges Western realistic representations and reflects the hybridity inherent in postcolonial society (ibid). Accordingly, Faris emphasizes the significant role of magical realism in developing a “multicultural literary sensibility” and a “postmodern literary sensibility” (ibid). In her approach, Faris analyzes both formalistic features and “cultural work” within magical realism through examining “narrative technique with ideas from postcolonial theory” (ibid 2).

Stephen M. Hart and Wen-chin Ouyang (2005) introduce magical realism from a different perspective. In “Magical Realism: Style and Substance,” Hart deals with magical realism as a global phenomenon whose inherent heterogeneity has given it a global capacity to express cultural displacement (Hart 1-13). Ouyang, in “Magical Realism and Beyond: Ideology of Fantasy,” argues that the “broad theoretical principles” of magical realism are in the danger of becoming a “straightjacket” (Ouyang 16); therefore, she suggests allowing texts to “speak for their own politics in the multi-cultural, inter-generic and cross-media contexts” (Ouyang 20).

Christopher Warnes (2009) goes beyond the “critical uncertainty” regarding magical realism as he sets the resolution of “tension between two discursive systems” to be the “starting point” for any critical work of magical realism (Warnes 2). Warnes aims to transcend the “generalizing accounts” (ibid 6) on magical realism as he considers a conjunctive approach to the genre which treats it as a “global phenomenon,” while still considering “local currents – cultural, literary, political, historical” in a given text (ibid). Hence, Warnes goes beyond the critical impasses resulting from readings of the genre in an attempt to derive the theory of magical realism from literary works rather than imposing it onto them (ibid 7). Warnes proposes that if magical realism utilizes both realism and the novelistic form, even as it extends or subverts realism, then it is “already responding to the terms of causality” (ibid). Accordingly, he organizes magical realism’s engagement with causality into two strands: “faith-based magical realism” and “irreverent magical realism” (ibid 12-13).

On the one hand, faith-based magical realism stands for a mechanism which reconciles “participation” with “the causal paradigm of the realist novel” (ibid 12). In doing so, it expands views on reality to “suspend rational-empirical judgements” (ibid). Warnes proposes that faith-based magical realism mostly aims to recover faith in a “non-western cultural world view” (ibid). While faith restored in these novels stands for faith in its religious sense, it might also stand for faith in the capacity of literature, for example (ibid). On the other hand, irreverent magical realism critiques the objective claims to truth in the modern Western world through expos-

ing their inherent cultural and historical contingency (ibid 13). This mode exposes the linguistic discursive nature of truth claims as “driven by discourse about reality rather than reality itself” (ibid). This mode is one that employs the same metafictional devices Jorge Luis Borges utilizes to defamiliarize discourse (ibid 13-16). Warnes emphasizes that the distinction between faith-based magical realism and irreverent magical realism within a single work might not be neat as novels might incorporate both of them, while still providing dominance to one (ibid 16). Warnes adds that distinguishing between the two modes within a single text is a “productive exercise” which transcends reductive approaches to magical realism as it returns the “literary critical discourse to the contextual circumstances of the magical realist text” (ibid 17).

Eva Aldea (2011) reviews a wide range of critical approaches to magical realism in an attempt to formulate her own approach. Aldea notes that “definitions of the genre remain vague and unsatisfactory if they concern themselves only with contexts or list characteristics without giving their specific function in the text, whether these be ‘anthropological’ postcolonial contexts or ‘ontological’ postmodern characteristics” (Aldea 10). Aldea concludes that the resolution of antinomy “between the real and the supernatural in the magic realist text,” which Chanady proposes, is “the most distinguishing feature” of the genre (ibid). Consequently, she demonstrates the two devices which Chanady attributes to resolution in magical realist texts: ‘authorial reticence’ and ‘focalizer’ (qtd. in Aldea 11). While authorial reticence marks the absence of explanation to magical events, the focalizer is the narrative voice or point of view which sets the real and the magic in a non-hierarchical order (ibid). Aldea reports that while Chanady’s definition does not require the correspondence of the magical realist worldview to a cultural worldview outside the text, Chanady stresses “consistency and verisimilitude” as key within the “fictitious world” of the text (qtd. in Aldea 12).

Accordingly, Aldea proposes a framework which delineates the “conditions of both the real and the magic in the text” while preserving a simultaneous non-hierarchy and distinction between them. This framework, Aldea proposes, should then enable connecting magical realism to the “cultural, geographical and even political contexts” it has emerged from (ibid). Eventually, the “ontological reconsideration” of magical realism would allow drawing contextual relations with magical realism in the text and thus would avoid “reductive conclusions” which determine magical realism as Western through its “dominant realism” (ibid). Given both Warnes’s and Aldea’s views that magical realism should be derived from magical realist texts themselves through close reading and textual analysis, the following section introduces Anglophone Arab writings to fulfill the connection between the novel of this study and magical realism.

Anglophone Arab Writings

Magical realism and Anglophone Arab writings are both mediatory realms where conflicting realities coexist. Whereas magical realism allows the coexistence of the real and the magic, Anglophone Arab novels function as cultural mediators between Arabs/Muslims and their counterparts in

diaspora. If magical realism serves as a “decolonizing agent” for its destabilizing of the Western dominant mode of realism (Faris 1), then its incorporation as a mode of expression in the selected Anglophone Arab novel should illuminate postcolonial themes existing in the text. Thus, implementing magical realism in the selected narrative emphasizes postcolonial themes as evolving in diaspora, where dominant Western discourses shape the hybrid identities of the characters.

Layla Al Maleh (2009) provides an overview on the development and general characteristics of Anglophone Arab literature. According to her, the Anglophone Arab literary corpus has come into light in the recent decades due to rising interest in postcolonial studies, New Literature and World Literature. Al Maleh finds it best to accommodate Anglophone Arab writers under the term ‘anglophone.’ By doing so, she aims to harmonize their voices within the larger multicultural family, rather than labeling them with terms which might otherwise signify undesirable interpretations. Having originated away from homeland, Al Maleh characterizes Anglophone Arab writings with several postcolonial themes, such as ‘hybridity,’ ‘exile’ and ‘diaspora.’ Therefore, Anglophone Arab literature has become a convenient vessel through which Arab thought and culture could be examined (Maleh x). However, to avoid hegemonizing Anglophone Arab writers for their use of English language, it is significant to consider Yousef Awad’s warning on the issue in *The Arab Atlantic* (2012). According to Awad, the motives behind Anglophone Arab writers’ use of English, as well as “the social and geopolitical daily practices that influence the language” can be totally disparate (Awad 20). Taking this into account, an elaboration on the circumstantial background through which *Bird Summons* has evolved is essential to fulfill the purposes intended for this study.

Leila Aboulela is a contemporary Sudanese writer who lives in Scotland. Aboulela has written a variety of literary works since her writing career has started. After moving to Aberdeen, Scotland, in her mid-twenties, she produced five novels: *The Translator* (1999), *Minaret* (2005), *Lyrics Alley* (2011), *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015), and *Bird Summons* (2019). Her literary works are renowned for their distinguishable exploration of “identity, migration and Islamic spirituality” (Aboulela, About Leila). Through narrating stories of flawed characters “who struggle to make choices using Muslim logic” (Aboulela, One Foot in Each of Two Worlds, and a Pen at Home in Both), Aboulela emphasizes the conflicts Muslims face in Britain. Both the personal faith of the author and her transition from Sudan to Scotland have majorly enhanced the value of her works (Aboulela, About Leila). In this sense, a couple of Arab authors, such as Rajab Tayeb Salih and Naguib Mahfouz, as well as Ahdaf Soueif, have influenced Aboulela’s work (ibid). In addition to these Arab authors, Jean Rhys, Anita Desai, Doris Lessing and some Scottish writers, such as Alan Spence and Robin Jenkins, have proved to be influential to Aboulela (ibid).

Arab British Writings and Identities

It is also significant to set a solid ground on which this study’s contextual analysis can take place. Therefore, it is essential to

take into consideration Awad’s investigation of the “positions Arabs occupy in the ethnic and racial discourses in Britain” because such positions influence Anglophone Arab literary productions in the country (Awad 281). Awad, in *The Arab Atlantic*, establishes a comparative study between some Arab American and Arab British woman writers’ works to delineate a “poetics of each group of writers” based on their politics of location (Awad 6). Awad develops his study through contextualizing differences between Arabs on both sides of the Atlantic (ibid). He particularly looks into the position both Arab American and Arab British people occupy following their distinct “immigration and settlement patterns” (ibid 7). As part of his investigation, Awad also reflects on the differences between the two groups of writers in representing responses to the aftermath of 9/11 and the ‘war on terror’ (ibid 243). While Arab American authors range from first to fourth generation citizens, Arab British writers are mostly “first generation exiles, academics, refugees and professionals” (ibid 27).

The dilemma of Arab British identity is associated with the history of cultural, political and social invisibility of Arab ethnicity in Britain. Having been lumped under ‘the Other Other’ category since the 1991 Census in Britain (Awad 243), Arabs have only come to be realized as an ethnic group in the 2011 Census (ibid 22). The dominance of South-Asian Muslim identity in Britain has always subsumed Arab British identity under it (ibid 281). Thus, the marginal position of Arabs in Britain echoes an inclination in the fiction of Arab British woman writers to explore “trans-cultural and cross-ethnic alliances” in a more distinct manner than Arab American writers (ibid 281). These writers acknowledge - rather than assimilate - differences and employ them as a basis to establish commonalities (ibid 282). Awad concludes how this tendency is manifested in the portrayal of Arab British characters who perceive their future as reliant on cross-cultural interaction (ibid 35). When it comes to responses to the aftermath of 9/11, Awad concludes how the ethnic and political invisibility of Arabs deems this theme peripheral to Arab British novelists (ibid 283). This contrasts with the tendency in novels by other Muslim British writers to represent “the post-9/11 anti-Islam fervor” (ibid 244). However, this is not surprising because the “popular and institutional anti-terror discourse in Britain” has focused on “the South-Asian-dominated political Muslim British identity” as the center of its attention (ibid 283).

Accordingly, Aboulela’s employment of magical realism in the expression of Arab British hybrid identities in Western diaspora will prove to be fruitful throughout this study because, generally, magical realism provides what Homi Bhabha calls a ‘third space’ of negotiation and representation as generating from the process of cultural hybridity (Bhabha 211). Hence, the investigation of magical realism’s function in the selected novel will not only reveal how such ‘third space’ allows the coexistence of the magic and the real, but will also reveal how this ‘third space’ allows an effectual negotiation and (re)construction of Arab hybrid identities in the magical realist narratives.

Aboulela’s *Bird Summons* revolves around three Muslim immigrant women in Britain, each coming from a different

Arab home country. Salma, Moni and Iman embark on a road trip to the Scottish Highlands to visit Lady Evelyn Cobbold's grave. According to the narrator, their purpose is to "honour [Lady Evelyn], the first British woman to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca, to educate themselves about the history of Islam in Britain and to integrate better by following the example of those who were of this soil and of their faith, those for whom this island was an inherited rather than adopted home" (Aboulela 1). However, the narrative - along with the journey - diverges into different courses. The varying migrancy patterns, ages and social backgrounds of the three women imposes on each of them a burden to confront through this 'spiritual' journey. Salma, in her forties, is married to a Scottish convert, and is already overwhelmed with her children's British identity. Contacting her first love back 'home' through social media activates her nostalgia towards Egyptian culture in general and her lost medical degree in particular. Moni, in her thirties, has quit her bank job years before to look after her disabled son, Adam. She feels detached from her 'home' in Sudan especially after she and her husband, Murtada, had last visited it; people there showed unkindness to Adam and her family blamed her for his disability. On the other hand, Moni is pleased with the National Health Services' efficiency with Adam in the UK. Hence, she resists her husband's desire to live with him in Saudi Arabia, especially as she knows that Murtada innately rejects Adam. Iman, a Syrian refugee in her twenties, has recently been abandoned by her third husband. Burdened by her beauty which has only prompted disappointing marriages, Iman comes to think of marriage as 'sanctioned' prostitution (ibid 34-35). With no chances to go back to an unsettled 'home' or bring her mother over, Iman yearns to achieve self-independence. During the journey, several unusual occurrences take place; mainly, a Hoopoe visits Iman to didact her through stories. Towards the end of the journey, each of the characters undergoes a distinct metamorphosis in the forest. This is when the Hoopoe turns up to the three of them as a storyteller and a guide and leads them out of the forest. Eventually, the journey helps the three women achieve changes both on the personal level and towards one another.

Review of Related Literature

While there is no academic research conducted on Aboulela's *Bird Summons*, the following paragraphs will be content with some interviews with Aboulela as well as magazine reviews on the novel. In "Writing as Spiritual Offering: A Conversation with Leila Aboulela" (2019), Keija Parssinen interviews Aboulela on her experience as an immigrant, her writing career and her fictional purposes. Aboulela responds to Parssinen's question on the theme of homecoming in her storytelling as follows:

My fascination with the idea of home and my intense homesickness led me to accept the Sufi concept of the soul having a spiritual homeland different than that of the physical body. Our bodies are at home on earth, but our spiritual homeland is the heavens. [...]. With regard to my writing, I found that with time my characters started to feel more at ease in Britain. (Aboulela 29)

As this quotation shows, Aboulela's exploration of the dilemma of Arab/Muslim hybrid identity in Britain through her writings has helped her overcome homesickness. This theme shows in her writings as she allows her characters to overcome homesickness through 'spirituality,' which eventually makes her characters feel more content in Britain.

Aboulela adds that in her novel, *Bird Summons*, the characters' "homecoming experience is a surreal spiritual journey in which objects take on subjective meanings and [the characters'] bodies experience transformations reflecting their specific dilemmas and challenges" (ibid). Shoba Viswanathan's review (2020) of *Bird Summons*, in *The Booklist*, describes Aboulela's use of "the spiritual journey trope" which mixes realistic fiction with magical realism. Viswanathan notes that while the characters explore their personal choices, they come to terms with "supportive sisterhood" (Viswanathan 34). Furthermore, Viswanathan stresses the role of Aboulela's hoopoe bird, with its Celtic and Muslim fables, in bridging the past with the present. Christine DeZelar-Tiedman's review of the novel (2020), in *The Library Journal*, describes how the novel combines "domestic realism" and "fantasy/allegory" (Tiedman 77) throughout the characters' journey to Lady Evelyn Cobbold's grave. Tiedman notes how "strange occurrences" force the three Arab British women to face their personal crises (ibid). However, Tiedman contends that while the supernatural elements start out delicately, they take over the book's last third, therefore making the conclusion "a bit heavy-handed if intriguing" (ibid).

The academic research which handles the hybridity of Anglophone Arab writings at large is varied and diverse. Critical studies on Anglophone Arab literary works have adopted varied approaches to emphasize issues of "religion, class, education and gender among other socio-political and historical issues" (Awad 14). While these critical approaches range from "feminist, post-structuralist" to "post-colonialist" (ibid), there are no critical works which have offered a magical realist approach to Anglophone Arab fiction. At the same time, no discussion of Anglophone Arab novels has been considered in critical anthologies, monographs and essays on magical realism. This includes Aida Azouqa's *The Literary Influence of The Medieval Arabian Nights on Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Novelists of the Arab World* (2019). While Ouyang handles Elias Khoury's *The Journey of Little Ghandi*, Azouqa's book is unprecedented in the Arab world in its examination of the *Arabian Nights*' impact on Garcia Marquez and six Arabic magical realist novels, including the works of Gamal al-Ghitani, Tahar Ben Jelloun, Fadhil al-Azzawi, Ibrahim al-Koni and Mahmoud al-Wardani. However, as the Arabic novels examined in Ouyang and Azouqa's works are originally written in Arabic before being translated to English, they do not fulfill the cultural hybridity inherent in Anglophone Arab works. Accordingly, this study is the first to look into the function of magical realism in articulating hyphenated identities in an Arab British writing.

Faith as a 'Home' in Leila Aboulela's *Bird Summons*

For the purposes of the ensuing analysis, it is important to highlight the role of faith in Aboulela's fiction as many crit-

ics have reflected on it. In "Leila Aboulela and the Ideology of Muslim Immigrant Fiction," Wail S. Hassan (2008) is concerned with examining Aboulela's attempt to achieve an "epistemological break" with colonial discourse through articulating an "alternative Islamic discourse" which is shaped by "immigrant perspectives" (Hassan 299). This alternative discourse finds inspiration "in Qur'anic and other forms of Islamic literature" such as "Sufi poetry" and "allegory" (ibid). Hassan proposes that Aboulela's fiction achieves "redemption and fulfillment through Islam" (ibid 300). Although Hassan criticizes Aboulela's feminism, he does not overlook her role in "Muslim immigrant literature," as this literary tendency marks "departure" from secularism while it represents the lives of Muslim minorities in Europe and North America to expose "prejudice, racism and Islamophobia" (ibid 317). On the other hand, Awad, in *The Arab Atlantic*, demystifies the oxymoron "Islamic feminism" in his discussion of transnational and Islamic feminism in Aboulela's fiction. Awad accentuates a transnational approach to Aboulela's feminism through which "understanding the local and global impediments" which delineate women's experiences helps establish "globally influential feminist movements" (ibid 122). According to Awad's transnational approach, Aboulela's 'Islamic feminism' initiates "dialogue with other feminist movements" against cultural differences, in the context of diaspora (ibid 163). It can therefore be concluded that Aboulela's employment of faith in her fiction serves as a liberating force, regardless of the mode through which such employment takes place.

A Textual Analysis of Magical Realism in *Bird Summons*

Most of the magical realist critics considered in this study refer to Chanady's taxonomy to highlight magical realism's most distinguishing feature: the resolution of contradiction between two codes of reality in the text, the natural and the supernatural. Whereas critics attribute the resolution to a range of literary devices, mostly postmodern, Chanady basically focuses on authorial reticence and focalizer in their ability to create a coherent worldview, regardless of its correspondence to a specific cultural world view outside the text (Aldea 8-12). The subsequent analysis reflects on two codes of reality in *Bird Summons* and how they resolve through Chanady's authorial reticence and focalizer, while in other positions, they resolve through postmodern devices.

The realist narrator in *Bird Summons* initially weaves a traditional linear narrative through introducing the journey to Lady Evelyn's grave, giving background on the three characters and then alternating between their individual and shared experiences. As the journey progresses, the narrator sustains a matter-of-fact tone in depicting the characters' magical experiences, which cause disruptions to the initially-established conventional narrative. The following paragraphs will handle key magical experiences in *Bird Summons* as contrasting with the 'real' in the narrative through appearing in a "present-day reality" as Chanady proposes (Aldea 15). These key magical experiences include contact with the dead, the appearance and storytelling of a hoopoe bird, the three characters' metamorphoses, time-travelling, and magical 'death.'

On their way to the holiday's location, Salma experiences a magical occurrence in a medieval castle during their stop near Dunnottar. This is also the first magical occurrence in the narrative. As she wanders through the ruins of a medieval castle, it comes to Salma that Lady Evelyn would be delighted in the coincidence of the chapel being faced towards the south-east, in the direction of Mecca, "like every purpose-built mosque in the country" (Aboulela 40). She hears Lady Evelyn's voice saying 'really?' in Arabic "coming after a lag in the conversation she had been imagining" (ibid). Although connections between the living and the dead are realistically impossible, the narrator places this *supernatural* event in a state of equivalence with the *natural* when he/she tells us that Salma is sure "that it was Lady Evelyn's voice speaking to her in the Arabic she learnt from her nannies when she was a child growing up in Cairo and the Algiers" (ibid 41). Using a matter-of-fact tone and presenting the fantastic event (in this case, hearing the dead) without comment is a technique which weaves 'irreducible elements' into the magical realist text (Faris 94). Although the narrator reports Salma's doubt, as she thinks hearing the dead is "more likely" imaginative (Aboulela 41), the narrator confirms the magical incident, saying that Salma now not only knows how Lady Evelyn looks like from the photos, but also "[has] her voice" (ibid). As Faris succinctly puts it, "[t]his technique of reporting doubts but affirming magic acknowledges hesitation but also combats it by co-opting it" (96). Therefore, the "fluid [boundary] between the worlds of the living and the dead" (ibid 22) stands as magical realist in various ways; it falls under two features, at least, of Faris' five features of magical realism: it is an 'irreducible element' (ibid 7) and it also resembles 'merging realms,' (ibid 21) because it introduces the voice of the dead among ordinary occurrences.

The narrator, being the 'focalizer,' also places the *ordinary* event of Iman's lying in her attic room, to observe the night sky, along with her detection of a '*distinct*' sound of movement and wings: "Through the window, a shy creature hesitated, asked permission to come in and speak to her" (Aboulela 81). Although Iman thinks herself to be dreaming, the narrator demonstrates 'authorial reticence' by affirming the materiality of the speaking creature in a matter-of-fact tone, which lacks both surprise and explanation (Aldea 11):

when she looked at [the bird] directly it disappeared. She had to pretend she was looking in another direction or at something else for the orange, black and white to materialize again. But this was not a problem, Iman wanted to listen to it and talk to it more than she wanted to look at it. The creature had a name, Hoopoe, it said, named after the bird in the Qur'an. 'You are too big for a hoopoe,' said Iman. 'You are fat.' She was not afraid to tease it. (ibid 82)

The magical Hoopoe continues to visit Iman, telling her different stories each time, therefore becoming a narrative device. As his stories are all 'embedded narratives,' occurring within the 'frame narrative,' - the novel itself - it stands for a postmodern metafictional trope, which is the *mise-en-abime* (story-within-story) (Lodge 702). The frame-breaking

which occurs as a result of this trope “introduce[s] radical instability” into the work (ibid 703). Because this metafictional trope of storytelling disrupts the realist linearity of time and space, it echoes the magical realist feature of ‘disruption of time and space.’ (Faris 23). Moreover, the storytelling of the Hoopoe bears resemblances with stories from Eastern and Western heritage, as Aboulela proposes in the Author’s Note to *Bird Summons* (Aboulela 285-287). This intertextuality with previous texts is yet another postmodern device which, according to Aldea, some critics, such as Cooper, Durix, Aldama and Faris, associate with magical realist fiction (Aldea 6-10). Aldea reports how Aldama takes this association further as he contends that postmodern devices, including intertextuality, are “impurities in the discourse” which are crucial to the resolution of antinomy in the magical realist text (ibid 7).

Magical realism most vigorously comes to light in the narrative as the three women’s magical realist experiences catalyze into three distinct metamorphoses during their forest walk as will be explained in the following paragraphs. When they have already gone halfway through the blue walking trail, Moni, exhausted, decides to return to the cottage. In the cottage, she wakes up after a short nap to find “herself rolling like a ball from side to side [...]. Her body [has] become round” (ibid 219). She finds herself outdoors, carried on Adam’s palm, the little boy she has been seeing since they arrived to the loch (ibid 220). Adam, who has suddenly grown in size, drops Moni, only to set her on the forest’s walking trail again, and there she stumbles upon Iman who has also transformed after having diverted from the trail. Iman has transformed into “an unidentified creature, a mix of mammal and reptile” (ibid 221). In the meantime, Salma, the last to remain on the trail, diverts to follow the red T-shirt - which she has recently been seeing - through the trees (ibid 230). Salma is driven through the hunting lodge into a university campus where Amir’s clinic is. Amir, her first love in Egypt, whom she has been contacting through social media ever since the journey started, puts her into surgery. She wakes up with “surgical scars” and “stiches all along her arms and thighs” (ibid 244) to discover that she has lost her muscles (ibid 246). Her Scottish mother-in-law, Norma, rescues her by leading her out to the edge of the forest. This is when the three friends reunite but in their post-metamorphoses’ forms: Moni as a Swiss ball, Iman as an animal, and Salma flat as a doormat. The narrative voice reports the *extraordinary* metamorphoses, which are not sensorially verifiable, on the same level in which it recounts *ordinary* events (Faris 8), such as the women’s conversing to find a way out of their new physical forms (Aboulela 247). The metamorphoses constitute a “merging of two realms [or] two worlds” (Faris 21) since the women are “captive between two worlds [...] not belonging really to one or the other” (qtd. in Faris 21).

Another manifestation of Faris’ magic feature, “disruptions of time, space and identity” (Faris 23) arises when the Hoopoe guides the three women back in time to witness the monastery, near the loch, as it *was* being built. The narrative disrupts the usual sense of time, for the women see workers constructing the monastery “dressed in clothes only seen

in paintings and films set centuries ago. The men were not using any modern building technology” (Aboulela 265). Although the narrator reports Salma’s sense of ‘oddity’ towards the time travelling, he/she reports none of his/her own: “[Salma’s] relief that she was near a familiar landmark overcame the *oddity* that they had been swept back in time” (ibid, emphasis added). In this sense, the detached narrator reports doubts but upholds the magic, therefore contests hesitation by co-opting it (Faris 96).

The narrative, and simultaneously the journey, comes to an end with a final magical experience as Salma reaches Lady Evelyn’s grave. By the grave, Salma receives a shot and dies, but then returns to her friends who are waiting for her in the car. She tells them, “I died [...]. Then, I felt better for it. It was easy to walk back” (Aboulela 282). Although death in itself is ‘real,’ it being ‘untrue’ in this context casts it as ‘unreal,’ for there is no way Salma could return to the car after being shot dead. Death, in this case, refers to what Aldea concludes of Chanady as a magical event which does not conform to the worldview of the realist – *and* empiricist - narrator, because it is simply ‘implausible,’ not necessarily ‘supernatural’ (Aldea 15). This event, thus, is a “two-sided mirror” as it inhabits an intersection of life and death, a merging of two realms (Faris 21). Now that the analysis has set *Bird Summons* as textually magical realist, it will proceed to reflect on the extra-textual cultural context which the previous key magical realist experiences feature in. For the analysis to determine the function of these magical realist instances, it takes into consideration the context of British diaspora where the three Muslim women are grappling with burdens inherent in their hybrid identity.

A Contextual Analysis of Magical Realism in *Bird Summons*

The very first magical experience in *Bird Summons* establishes faith as a prominent theme in the narrative/journey and thus in the novel’s context. Salma’s magical experience in hearing Lady Evelyn’s voice foregrounds a solid connection between Lady Evelyn and the Arab Muslim immigrant, which therefore corresponds to the purpose of the journey that the realist narrator has already described. Nonetheless, Aboulela’s use of magical realism to reinforce such connection with Lady Evelyn’s ‘voice’ is crucial to extending the ‘limited’ causal paradigm of both realism and the novel as modes of expression. The limitedness of the causal paradigm is “born of the circumstances of its development from the early modern period” (Warnes 12). Whereas postcolonial writers attribute this limitedness to colonialism and neocolonialism (ibid), the current analysis proposes that Aboulela’s causal paradigm in *Bird Summons* corresponds to British modernity and secularism. According to Aboulela in a conference on YouTube during *Bird Summons*’ launch in the Lahore Literary Festival, the characters of the novel live in a secular environment which is not sympathetic towards their faith (Aboulela). The magic, in this instance, extends the horizon of British secularity to contain Muslim faith as universal. Magical realism, in this instance, allows foregrounding the connection between an aristocratic Scot-

tish Muslim convert and Arab Muslim immigrant women; an event which would normally be circumscribed within the causal paradigm, which - within this twenty-first-century context - corresponds to secularism. Salma, through connecting with Lady Evelyn, not only transcends the barriers of ethnicity and class, but also those of language.

This occurs when she recalls the fact that Lady Evelyn spoke the Arabic she learnt in Cairo and the Algiers (Aboulela 40). This multi-dimensional alliance between the non-Arab Muslim and the Arab Muslim creates what Bhabha terms as a 'third space' of cultural hybridity (Bhabha 211). This 'third space' foregrounds a "transcultural and cross-ethnic dialogue," a tendency which Awad defines in the works of Aboulela and other Arab British woman writers (Awad 35). Accordingly, this demonstrates how magical realism has the capacity to embrace "marginal voices," "submerged traditions" and "emergent literatures" (Faris 1). The manner in which the magical employment of Lady Evelyn's 'voice' responds to the secularist context of Britain resembles Warnes's faith-based magical realism, as faith becomes the mechanism through which a participatory ordering of reality, like religion (Warnes 10), reconciles with the 'causality' of the realist novel (ibid 12).

However, Aboulela's presentation of religion as such transcends organized religion through establishing continuity between Islam and Christianity as 'faiths' which are "associated with that which cannot be seen but which is nonetheless real" (qtd. in Warnes 12). This is true with regard to various examples in the novel. In this example, before Salma even hears Lady Evelyn's voice, her very presence in the chapel makes her establish a connection with its people; she thinks how although people who knelt in it centuries ago were *not* her *ancestors* and did *not* share her *religion*, she still understood them because she lived knowing that *after death*, she will be held to account (Aboulela 40). As a result, Salma's magical hearing of Lady Evelyn's voice complements her anterior identification with the people of the chapel, and therefore informs the theme of continuity of faith through her participatory recognition of faith as universal.

Given that both the Hoopoe's presence and storytelling in the narrative are magical, the analysis will reflect on the functions of such magic in the diasporic context of the novel. The Hoopoe, quoting Aboulela's own words, is a "spiritual teacher" for the women in *Bird Summons*, as he "imparts ancient wisdom and guidance," however, his "powers are limited" (Aboulela 287). The Hoopoe occupies two positions in the text: whereas he emerges as a didactic storyteller to Iman in the beginning of the journey, he returns towards the end to guide Moni, Salma and Iman out of the forest and then takes them back in time to witness the building of the monastery.

The very condition through which the Hoopoe initially emerges in the narrative sets the ground for his spiritual power and wisdom in a twenty-first-century diasporic narrative; the Hoopoe magically appears to Iman following her trauma with Ibrahim's abandonment, to facilitate her eventual transformation in the diasporic context. To shed the light on the Hoopoe's magical realist role in Iman's diasporic

experience, it is first important to investigate her trauma. Iman's trauma finds its roots in her sociopolitical "localized experience" (Awad 163) as a Syrian refugee in Britain rather than in the particularity of her divorce. Growing into an adult during the Syrian Civil War, Iman has grown in a familial atmosphere where she could not develop self-autonomy. Her beauty, being her only asset, has put her into three consecutive marriages, the second of which has brought her to Britain. After the failure of this second marriage, her parents refrained her from going back to Syria (ibid 34), which often felt like a rejection to her (ibid 52). She ends up marrying Ibrahim, who "rescue[s] her from her homelessness and aimlessness" (ibid 34). Now that Ibrahim has divorced her in a hostile manner, the incident triggers Iman's 'homelessness' anew. When Iman gets back in the car after the incident, she finds soothing comfort with a shadow/reflection "flying alongside the car" (ibid 58), which is later introduced as the Hoopoe.

Iman realizes that her beauty has not brought her safety (ibid 52), but rather has been a burden which has brought on patriarchal husbands on whom she has been financially dependent. Her imbalanced marriages thus make her view marriage as 'sanctioned' prostitution (ibid 68). Having no choice to return 'home,' she becomes aware of her uselessness as a refugee with "zero qualifications" and recognizes the uncertainty of her future in Britain (ibid 68-73.) This is when the Hoopoe makes his first magical visit to Iman, as a storyteller. The Hoopoe proclaims his wisdom to Iman for having seen the "east and west, north and south" (ibid 82). He then tells her his first story and continues to visit her with different stories each time. So, how does the Hoopoe's magical storytelling function in Iman's journey of transformation in diaspora?

The Hoopoe's magical storytelling facilitates the creation of a realm of coexistence which paves the way for Iman to attain self-autonomy and belonging in diaspora. While the Hoopoe introduces himself as named after the Hoopoe in the Qur'an (Aboulela 82), the stories he tells echo stories from both Eastern and Western heritage, as Aboulela affirms in the Author's Note to *Bird Summons*. According to her, while the Hoopoe's wisdom resembles his significance in King Solomon's story in the Qur'an and in Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*, his stories in *Bird Summons* reflect those of Sufi Rumi, *Kalila and Dimna*, the Scottish folktales of Aberdeenshire, *The Pilgrim's Progress* and the fantasy of George McDonald (ibid 285-7). As demonstrated earlier, intertextuality with previous texts is one of other postmodern devices which some critics associate with the resolution of antinomy in the magical realist text (Aldea 7). Aldea uses Hutcheon's term, 'ex-centrism' to outline the intersection where postmodern devices meet with magical realism (ibid 8). She uses D'Hean's definition of 'ex-centrism' to validate her point, as he proposes that 'ex-centrism' is the feature through which magical realism appropriates 'the center' to create "an alternative world correcting so-called existing views of reality" (ibid 9). Accordingly, the intertextuality in the Hoopoe's storytelling is an ex-centric postmodern magical device which resolves the antinomy between "two separate codes"

(ibid 15). As such, the postmodern magical intertextuality contributes to the resolution of antinomy between the codes of the real/natural and magic/supernatural. In other words, the demonstrated intertextuality resolves antinomy between the causal paradigm of the Eurocentric novel and the experience articulated in Iman's Arab Muslim immigrant narrative and puts them "in a state of equivalence" where "neither of them has a great claim to truth/referentiality" (Warnes 3).

The Hoopoe's storytelling resembles Warnes's irreverent magical realism for its employment of an ex-centric postmodernist intertextuality. This magical realist intertextuality places both Eastern and Western heritage, as well as the Eurocentric novelistic form and the Arab Muslim immigrant narrative in a position of coexistence. However, the Hoopoe's employment also stands for several other functions as part of irreverent magical realism. Given that irreverent magical realism "elevates the non-real to the status of the real to cast doubt on the epistemological status of both" (Warnes 14), the magical realist narrative in *Bird Summons* employs the Hoopoe in an identical manner. The magical realist narrative, then, elevates the mythical/magical Hoopoe to the status of the real, therefore casts doubt on what is 'real' and what is not. This also corresponds to what Faris describes as the "linguistic magic" which "makes already created characters into new ones" as it "thrives on the presence of intertextual bricolage in postmodern writing" (Faris 114). Accordingly, the Hoopoe is a tool of "defamiliarization of discourse" which uses "metaphorical and metafictional devices" in its storytelling while it does not correspond to a particular worldview (Warnes 16). While the Hoopoe's storytelling in its totality neither corresponds to the West or non-West, neither to Christianity nor to Islam, neither to diaspora nor home, this does not mean that, as an 'irreverent' magical realist device, it is not concerned with asserting "new forms of cultural identity" in its questioning of the rationalist project" (ibid). This being the case, the 'ex-centric' role of the Hoopoe's postmodern and magical storytelling sets up "an alternative world" (ibid 9) which simultaneously corrects essentialist views of identity. In fact, the *irreverence* presented signifies what Awad describes as a response to the 'invisible' position Arabs occupy in Britain, a position which the dominant discourses on race and ethnicity delineate (Awad 27).

As an example of irreverent magical realism, the Hoopoe "operates metaphorically" because "it stands in place of an idea or a set of ideas," to highlight the incapacity of binaristic thinking (ibid 14-15). Viewed in this way, the Hoopoe, through his diverse storytelling, can be said to be a metaphor for the Bhabha's 'third space' of cultural hybrid identity, for this metaphor informs Iman's diasporic reality in particular, and that of the Arab Muslim immigrant in general. The hybrid cultural identity which the Hoopoe stands for resonates with Stuart Hall's identification of cultural identity as in his "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." Hall bases his second sense of cultural identity on differences rather than on a coherent and fixed essential identity. It is a process "of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'" because it "belongs to the future as much as to the past" (ibid 225). Such iden-

tity depends on a "politics of position which has no absolute guarantee in [...] a transcendental 'law or origin'" (ibid 226). Hall argues that diasporic identities continually "produce and reproduce themselves anew through transformation and difference" (ibid). Based on Hall's sense of cultural identity which has just been discussed, Aboulela's Hoopoe, which narrates stories from Eastern/Muslim and Western/Christian heritage, is a metaphor of hybridized identities in British diaspora; an emblem which flourishes through heterogeneity and continuous transformation. In a nutshell, Aboulela's magical Hoopoe sets the Arab Muslim diasporic identity in Britain as reconfigurable, therefore it creates the space for constituting a "new form of cultural identity" which goes beyond the capacity of binaristic thinking. As a result, the magical realism in the Hoopoe's diverse storytelling runs a "transculturation process" which results from "encounters between different cultures throughout the world for several reasons" (Faris 134).

Despite the Hoopoe's storytelling, Iman's unresolved burdens undermine her ability to absorb the Hoopoe's teachings, and thus her ability to adopt the new form of existence/identity he promotes. This explains why the narrator says, "the costumes [were] more intimate than his stories; her anger [was] louder than his voice" (Aboulela 201). As clear in the quotation, the Hoopoe's storytelling to Iman parallels another magical experience, which is also exclusive to Iman: trying out costumes (most of which are Disney costumes) from "the cupboard [which] continue[s] to yield costumes" (ibid 191, emphasis added). Iman's experiments with the costumes make her practise self-autonomy like never before, and therefore, permits her to reevaluate her perspective on clothing in general and the Hijab in particular. She realizes that "she [is] in Britain now and [that] there [are] choices" (ibid 170). She recognizes the performativity - as in Judith Butler's theory (Butler 519-531) - of costumes, and how each indicates a role/identity. Iman's costume tryouts bring her to question her selfhood, for she asks herself, "If I'm not dressed for a role then who am I?" (ibid 183). Iman eventually conceives that she *had* no choice in wearing Hijab and therefore decides to take it off (ibid, emphasis added). She says, "why do I dress the way I do? Because that's how my mother dressed and the women in my village. Or that's how my husband of the time wanted me to dress. Each one had an opinion" (ibid). Accordingly, Iman's experience with taking off the Hijab not only serves to reclaim her self-autonomy but also reconfigures hijab as a personal choice of faith rather than a mere habitual performative form of expression. This reconfiguration serves to demystify the Hijab as "Arab-Islamic cultural symbol" which is often associated with patriarchy (Awad 35). Iman's magical realist experiences with the costumes thus triggers her resistance and foregrounds the Hijab as a personal choice of faith. The role of the magical realist experience, hence, exhibits in its acceleration of a medium of resistance, a 'third space,' through which Iman can practise her experimentation and achieve her self-autonomy.

As Iman gradually attains her self-autonomy, "she still [wants] to listen to [the Hoopoe], the wisdom of his words

mesmerizing if difficult to apply, comforting despite being cautionary" (Aboulela 201). Nevertheless, the Hoopoe drives Iman's transformation to the next level when he stops visiting her after she takes off her Hijab, as this obliges her to go through another process of transformation:

To listen to the Hoopoe now, she must join all others in the forest, sitting as if she were one of its inhabitants, no longer a princess with a crown, no longer high up in the attic. And she must wait and interpret. She must interpret because the language in which the Hoopoe spoke to other creatures was not her language, not her mother tongue. [...]. The story that the Hoopoe told sounded like an echo of another tale, a classic of two sides, someone turning from friend to foe, from companion to devil, someone becoming something else. [...] Usually Iman did not cry when listening to a story, but this time she sensed the loss and confusion, how change was the nature of life, whether violent or subtle. (ibid 201-202)

Iman's inability to interpret the language through which the Hoopoe speaks, in this example, necessitates Iman's acquisition of this language, which is "not her mother tongue" (ibid). Iman, whose English is rudimentary, has to improve her English so she would fully inhabit the space of hybridity which the language implies. Hence, Iman's acquisition of English would be an emblem of her hyphenated identity (ibid). As Iman shows inadequacy in fully adopting different emblems of cultural hybridity, the narrative takes her through a metamorphosis in the forest, which is another magical realist experience. Iman's metamorphosis occurs along with her friends' metamorphoses.

Based on Warnes's analysis of metamorphosis from human to *animal* form in two different novels, Warnes defines metamorphosis within irreverent magical realism because metamorphosis stands for a supernatural event which operates metaphorically, bearing different indications from one text to another (Warnes 14-15). Hence, it is possible to view the metamorphoses in *Bird Summons* in the light of Warnes's analysis, although not all of the metamorphoses in the narrative entail transformation to *animal* form; whereas Moni transforms to a Swiss ball, Salma transforms to a flat object, and Iman to an animal. So, to understand the meaning/function of the magical metamorphoses in *Bird Summons*, it is important to look into the 'localized experiences' which formulate the three women's personal burdens in their diasporic context. Accordingly, the analysis will reflect on the function of the three metamorphoses through reflecting on Moni, Salma and Iman's conflicts which are shaped by their 'localized experiences' in their diasporic context.

First, Moni's 'localized experience' as an Arab Muslim immigrant is mainly concerned with her overt dedication to her son's disability. While she belongs to a high-class society in her home country, Sudan, her migrancy takes place due to her marriage to middle-class Mustafa, whose "instinct to provide" (Aboulela 16) tempts her to accept his proposal. However, giving birth to Adam, who has a disability, changes the dynamics of her marriage and life irrevocably. Moni refuses to join Murtada in Saudi Arabia, arguing that the National Health Services in Britain are more efficient

for Adam's future. On the other hand, Mustafa, who is still struggling to accept Adam, refuses to join her again in Britain because he believes he is unwanted there, as he argues:

why would I live where I'm not wanted? Here I come and go as I like without ever having to justify myself. On Fridays I wear my jellabiya and saunter to the mosque in my slippers. There is no pressure to prove anything. [...]. Where's your pride, Moni? People see you as a leech benefiting from the free health system. (ibid 26)

Murtada's "pattern of immigration," – quoting Awad's terminology in *The Arab Atlantic* – as a professional seeking to better his life shapes his experience in Britain, and therefore, makes him self-conscious of his inferiority as a middle-class Arab. However, Moni continues to resist change; her dedication to Adam even makes her neglect herself as well as her surroundings. Consequently, Adam's disability becomes the mirror to Moni's inflexibility. Hart (2005) argues that disability "operates as a metaphor of political disempowerment" in his review of a magical realist novel (10). In the current context, Adam's disability operates as a metaphor for the position which Arabs inhabit in ethnic discourses in Britain, for although Adam benefits from the National Services, he has no voice. According to Awad, "Arab British people have been marginalized and rendered invisible in racial and ethnic discourses in Britain" (Awad 27). Throughout *Bird Summons*, Adam is substantially absent; what we know about Adam is what Moni thinks of him, for she has become accustomed to speak on his behalf. In fact, this reinforces Adam's position as peripheral and poses questions on the future of the second generation of Arab British immigrants. The socioeconomic context to Moni's marriage and motherhood thus lays the ground for the interpretation of her metamorphosis, which is essential to answer questions on the future of Arab British marginalization.

Ever since her arrival to the loch, Moni encounters a boy named Adam, but this Adam does not speak. Despite his muteness, he undergoes a metamorphosis along with Moni's metamorphosis. When Moni metamorphoses into a ball, she finds herself to be carried on this Adam's palm, who in his turn has grown in size. Eventually, he drops her onto the floor of the forest, but "her new round shape protect[s] her from injury" (ibid). Whereas this Adam's growth in size metaphorizes Moni's reinforcement of her son's disability, and consequently his marginalization, Moni's roundness literalizes a roundness crucial to her character as it softens her inflexibility. Through her metamorphosis, Moni acquires the ability to adapt, which reflects positively on her future as a cultural hybrid in diaspora, as well as on Adam's, who stands for the second generation of Arab British immigrants.

Second, Salma's 'localized experience' as an Arab Muslim immigrant becomes understandable upon observing the circumstances of her marriage and motherhood. Being married to a *Scottish* convert, David, Salma feels like an outsider as a wife and as a mother. The Britishness of her children makes her seek refuge in childlike Iman, with whom she can easily practise authority. Being displaced from Egypt, Salma is stripped off the authority she used to practise back 'home', whether her physical authority over

Amir, her first love, or her later authority with David, as a foreigner in Egypt. Salma's nostalgia towards home revives when Amir contacts her through social media. As Amir addresses her as "Dr. Salma," she remembers what she has paid in return for her marriage to David; her medical degree and her 'home' (Aboulela 209). Through the journey to Lady Evelyn's grave, through "digging deeper all the time [and] craving connections," Salma makes an effort to belong (ibid 41). When Iman takes off the Hijab, Salma feels as though Iman is "ditching all that they had shared" (ibid 189), thus becomes more nostalgic towards Amir, and Egypt. Whereas Salma's migrancy strips her off her home, culture, and her imagined career, the journey to Lady Evelyn's grave unexpectedly contaminates her authority as it forces her to give up her car and mobile. This is when Salma's nostalgia takes a tangible shape through a series of magical realist events which lead to her eventual metamorphosis. During the forest walk with her friends, Salma goes off track to follow "that red moving through the green" (ibid 226). This red, in fact, refers to a person she has been trying to chase since their arrival to the loch. In a previous stage, we learn that this person is a magical realist apparition as the narrator reports that "*he* himself wasn't clear" (ibid 98, emphasis added), but "the imprints of his trainers" "were the evidence;" they were "the only thing about him that was *tangible*" (ibid, emphasis added). The 'red' in this apparition, apparently, resembles Amir, for Salma tells Amir earlier that she remembers his clothes, his red T-shirt, in particular (ibid 159).

Chasing the magical realist apparition of Amir drives Salma through different stations. For example, Salma runs through a Victorian building, where she sees a tapestry of a Scottish queen with her only child, and it reminds her of Norma, her mother-in-law, and David. It then strikes Salma that "through her children she [is] part of the history of this country" (ibid 239). "No matter what happened, even if she did leave, *and now she [has] every intention of leaving*, this connection would always be there" (ibid, emphasis added). Salma is then taken into Amir's clinic, where she walks into Amir's arms, only to find herself on the operating table. Salma then notices "surgical scars and [...] stitches all along her arms and thighs" (ibid 244), and fails to collect her power and get up. This is when Norma comes at her rescue. Finally, when Norma delivers Salma to the "edge of the forest" (ibid 245), Salma's metamorphosis takes a concrete shape, for she becomes flat as a doormat. Whereas Salma's magical journey through the Victorian building shifts her perspective on her former 'foreignness' through allowing her to establish 'a' historical position as an Arab Muslim immigrant in Britain, Salma's magical realist surgery in Amir's clinic establishes a cross-cultural and cross-ethnic dialogue between the non-Arab and non-Muslim, Norma, and Salma, herself, as an Arab Muslim in Britain.

As a result, Salma's pursuit of the magical apparition, a metaphor of her nostalgia, serves to - quoting Warnes's words in his analysis of nostalgia in Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* - "undermine the expectations of linear time and to suffuse the present with the paradox of nostalgia" (Warnes 81). As such, Salma recognizes what Marquez describes as nostalgia's ability to "[wipe] away bad

memories, and [magnify] the good ones" (qtd. in Warnes 80). Magical realism's "revisionist agenda," as Faris calls it, allows Salma to survive the "lure of nostalgia" (ibid) while establishing a historical position within Britain, as well as a cross-cultural and cross-ethnic dialogue with other groups. While Salma overcomes her nostalgia, her full recognition of herself as a cultural hybrid still continues to develop when her metamorphosis takes place, along with her friends' metamorphoses, as will be demonstrated later.

Third, Iman's 'localized experience' as an Arab Muslim immigrant, not only deprives her of self-autonomy, as has been discussed in detail earlier, but also makes her perceive her beauty as a burden. Iman "wishes for another kind of existence" (Aboulela 210), where beauty is not a responsibility. During the trio forest walk, Iman remains last on the walking trail and then suddenly stumbles on her knees as "the darkness of the forest [becomes] womblike and welcoming" (ibid 226). She finds the Hoopoe "hovering above her," pleading her to get up (ibid). However, Iman crosses the Hoopoe, mad that since she has taken off her Hijab, he has not visited her. She refuses to abide to him as he too is "possessive about her" and believes that "she need[s] protecting and saving" (ibid 227). Accordingly, she submits to the hollowing in the ground, for earth to incubate her. This is when Iman realizes how beauty and femininity "[overpowered] her soul" and pulled her away from her humanity" (ibid). Next, Iman falls asleep and wakes to a metamorphosis in which "her new body [is] not under her control" (ibid).

Iman, who has become a beast, loses linguistic signification, as she cannot remember names of things neither in Arabic nor in English. Yet, "a part of her [is] still self-conscious" (ibid 232). The metamorphosis allows Iman to experience ultimate freedom, devoid of identity, tradition and home. Iman realizes that the Hijab [is] not covering her femininity, but rather her femininity [is] covering her human soul (ibid 234); "there would always be Iman, the soul, heading out and returning. Her soul [is] the origin from which there [is] no escape" (ibid). Only through this magical realist metamorphosis which literalizes her entrapment between two existences can Iman release herself from this very entrapment. Iman thus achieves a higher consciousness as she acknowledges her soul as *the* origin. This aligns with the "Sufi concept of the soul having a spiritual homeland different than that of the physical body" which Aboulela describes in an interview with Parssinen as a prominent theme in her works (Aboulela 29). At the same time, Iman's finding of belonging in a spiritual home corresponds to faith-based magical realism. Iman's belonging to a spiritual homeland reveals "an acceptance of an order which [...] is not derived from empirical observation, reason or proof" (Warnes 12). Faith, in this sense, "suspend[s] rational empirical judgements about the way things are in favor of an expanded order of reality" (ibid). This can be concluded to aim at the restoration of "certain ways of seeing the world" which reverse the reality in which the Arab British immigrant is "othered by metropolitan powers" (ibid 15).

Finally, when the three women reunite in the forest in their post-metamorphoses forms, they are "put [...] on

equal footing" (Aboulela 223), one that erases national and socioeconomic barriers between them. This magical realist realm of equivalence is particularly crucial to Salma's change, as her flatness and loss of authority, resulting from the metamorphosis, force her to accept the power in being part of the group. The three women unite their efforts to achieve both a physical and spiritual return out of the forest: "Their pace [is] slow but matched" but their happiness comes from a "shared purpose" (ibid 249). Together, they encounter their fears in the "valley of fears" (ibid 255), but they cling onto each other. Salma then contemplates their need to pray and the narrator adds the following:

They had come to a country where people had stopped praying and not realized that they were the ones brought here to pray. They did not consciously take up the worship which others had left. They did not realize that they were a *continuation*, needed to fill a vacuum, [...]. They misunderstood their role. [...] They inflated their problems and followed their egos, counselled each other but rejected what was right. [...] and now they were far away, deep in the realm of consequence. Iman could not remember the words, neither Moni nor Salma could stand up straight. *But they could pray with their hearts, couldn't they?* [...]. *Imperfect prayers* like those of the unclean and those who had not yet fully repented. Feeble prayers but sincere because they were in genuine need. (ibid 256, emphasis added)

This is when they find the Hoopoe hovering above them, not as the "cute bird who perched on [Iman's] window sill telling stories" but rather as powerful; as "the mightiest of birds" (ibid 257). Accepting the Hoopoe as their guide, they achieve both a physical and a spiritual return: they return to their human forms and then *consciously* take up prayer; they "[touch] their foreheads to the ground in gratitude" (ibid 260).

Accordingly, the magical realist trio metamorphoses oil the wheels for a 'third space' where an Arab British visibility is possible, for this 'third space' allows the three women to achieve what Awad describes as "horizontal ties cutting across national origin" (Awad 23). The three women transcend national origin and essentialized views of identity through achieving a faith-based continuation with the land, despite the imperfection of their 'faith(s)'. As Azouqa describes of the protagonist's metamorphoses in Ibrahim al-Koni's *The Bleeding of the Stone*, the trio metamorphoses in *Bird Summons* bring the characters' state of Otherness into play; however, while Azouqa's analysis locates the protagonist's Otherness within a postcolonial context (Azouqa 109), Otherness here results from the three women's displacement. So, while the metamorphoses in *Bird Summons* literalize the hybridity of the Arab Muslim British subjects, they set it in a realm of coexistence where hybridity decenters the dominant discourses which marginalize them. As Warnes argues, the metamorphosis, in terms of irreverent discursive magical realism is "not [...] an escape from history, but on the contrary, an engagement with reality that seeks to defamiliarize the usual terms on which discourse about history, culture and identity is founded" (Warnes 102). The collective effect of

the metamorphoses, therefore, erases the essentialist view of identity, for "hybridity [is] the key to the coming into being of [...] newness" (ibid 120). It is noteworthy here that the role of the magical realist metamorphoses coincides with Bhabha's 'third space' of cultural hybridity, as it creates a "new area of negotiation of meaning and representation" (Bhabha 211). So, while magical realism allows the coexistence of two separate codes of reality on an equal level, the 'third space' it stimulates permits the hybridity of cultural identity. This hybridity "bears the traces of the feelings and practices which inform it," but "it doesn't give them the authority of being prior in the sense of being original, but rather in the sense of being anterior" (ibid 211).

CONCLUSION

Having set both the formal and contextual analyses of magical realism in *Bird Summons*, it is evident now how the text embodies a "coherent presence" (Warnes 82) of two codes, the real and the magical, as correspondent to secularist and faithful worldviews. With reference to Warnes's irreverent magical realism and faith-based magical realism, it is possible to "provide the rationale for the presence of magical realism" in *Bird Summons*. Whereas irreverent magical realism is "conditioned by a sceptical irreverence to the claims of realism" (ibid), and in our context, to the corruption of the metropolis's secularism, faith-based magical realism extends the scope of the realist causal paradigm, to restore a world view where faith transcends social, ethnic and cultural differences. As a result, *Bird Summons* simultaneously critiques and constructs, rather than merely critiquing to deconstruct. This proves Warnes's argument that critical readings of magical realism often produce impasses in seeing that magical realism "deconstruct[s] notions of subjectivity, history, nationhood, reality, without any sense of how it can also construct these notions" (ibid 7). It is also noteworthy to state here that this magical realist reading of *Bird Summons* is neither "escapist," nor "reactive," as Warnes reports of the conclusions of some critical readings on magical realism (Warnes 81-82). This non-escapist and non-reactive view is provided by the universalist faith which Aboulela inhabits in her novel.

Aboulela, thus links "two incompatible worlds by forging a new humanistic space comprising a historical knowledge of both self and other" (Wahab 222). Aboulela's *Bird Summons* occupies a peculiar mediatory position both on the textual and contextual levels. Both as an Anglophone Arab novel and as a magical realist novel, it reconciles conflicting paradigms while retaining the distinctions between them. Whereas the utilization of English grants this Anglophone Arab novel the role of a cultural mediator between Arabs/Muslims and their counterparts in diaspora, the magical realist narrative enables the coexistence of the real and the magic within the text. The codes of the real and the magic, in their turn, correlate with a particular cultural worldview in the novel.

When the Hoopoe takes the three women back in time to witness the monastery's building process, they recognize the changes that have taken over it across time (ibid 265).

This magical realist time-travelling serves to expose the effects of corruption which has taken over 'religion' as a result of secularism. However, despite this corruption, the three women manage to sense "something of the prayers left behind" in the refectory (ibid 266). According to the realist narrator, "the *similarity* between them [and he who built the monastery] was more than *difference*" (ibid 267 italics mine). The "affinity" they had "existed despite the *barriers* of time and race" (ibid italics mine). "They stood on the pulpit and recited Qur'an" (ibid 268). Their action was not "*radical*" but rather a "*continuation*" (ibid). This magical realist experience also corresponds to faith-based magical realism in its establishment of faith-based identities which transcend the barriers of ethnicity and organized religion. Therefore, the experience might as well respond to 'Islamophobia' and the 'War on Terror' which have affected Arabs as part of the larger - and more visible - Muslim community in Britain.

Hence, *Bird Summons* employs magical realism to foreground a progressive faith-based belonging for the Arab British cultural hybrid subject. As such, the magical realist medium in the novel stands for Bhabha's 'third space,' as it transcends the paradigms of British secularist reality, to realize the universality of Islamic faith. Aboulela employs magical realism in the distinct magical realist experiences through which her three Arab British characters, Salma, Moni and Iman, go in their journey to the Scottish Highlands. As the magical realist medium permits the characters' dismantling of the cultural baggage which is inherent in their cultural hybridity, the characters come to embrace this cultural hybridity. Concurrently, the characters realize faith as the ground for transnational ties which transcend essentialized views of identity. Consequently, this magical realist medium stands for a 'third space' where faith allows the Arab British subjects to enunciate a transnational, trans-cultural and cross-ethnic dialogue in diaspora.

On the one hand, this magical realist medium of faith decenters the marginalizing discourses on Arab ethnicity in Britain as well as the Islamophobic atmosphere surrounding Islamic faith; in this sense, it corresponds to irreverent magical realism. On the other hand, this magical realist medium extends the British secularist worldview to include universalist Islamic faith; as such, it corresponds to faith-based magical realism. Aboulela's promotion of a faith-based belonging for her diasporic characters through magical realism neither takes place in a romanticized nor in a radical manner. Instead, the magical realist narrative foregrounds Islamic tolerance and demystifies faith as home. This being the case, the employment of magical realism in *Bird Summons* allows Aboulela to critique dominant discourses on Arab/Muslim identities in British diaspora, only to (re)construct Arab British culturally-hybrid identities. Accordingly, Aboulela constructs a space where the negotiation and (re) construction Arab British identities materializes, in response to the context in which such identities emerge. The critical reading of magical realism in *Bird Summons* has highlighted magical realism's valorizing of the visibility of Arab British subjects beyond marginalizing discourses, whether eth-

nic or religious. Predominantly, Aboulela's employment of magical realism to promote home as a spiritual belonging of faith might forge a new possibility for Arab British characters to perceive their existence in Britain as being beyond temporary.

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