'Failure To Bag A PhD Led Me To Creative

By Toun Gabi-Williams

For a shining exponent of the global movement towards diversity and inclusion, readers need look no further than Leila Aboulela – her life and her work. Part Egyptian, part Sudanese, resident in Scotland, her novels and short stories continue to be lauded for the inspired ways in which they engage the spectrum of cultural issues diasporic Muslims grapple with and the new (and old) challenges facing Muslims resident in the global north. I met her at *Africa Writes 2018*, the yearly literature festival hosted by the Royal African Society at the British Library in London, UK. Ms Aboulela had been invited to discuss her latest gift, a collection of short stories entitled, *Elsewhere, Home*, which went on to win the 2018 Saltire Literary Award for Fiction. Leila Aboulela is distinguished by her gentleness and considered words. It is hard to forget her eyes: the soft, clear light they exude. Later, I would learn she is a devout Muslim, steeped in Islamic spirituality.

What was growing up in Sudan as the daughter of an Egyptian mother and a Sudanese father like? Were there cultural conflicts? Or do the two cultures have enough in common for that kind of household to be fairly conventional?

SUDANESE and Egyptian cultures have a lot in common – both are African, Arab and Muslim. I absorbed Sudanese culture from interaction with my father's side of the family and the culture of Khartoum. In the summer months, we went to Cairo, and there, I absorbed Egyptian culture through my mother's family, the radio, television and cinema. Marriages between Sudanese and Egyptians are common. Having said that, I personally did experience many conflicts. For example, I grew up speaking Egyptian colloquial Arabic, my mother's tongue. Because of this, I was often made fun of at school and by my father's side of the family. At the very least, people would express surprise. A close friend of mine, who also had a Sudanese father and an Egyptian mother, was able to switch easily between the two accents/dialects. I, however, couldn't, and so, I often spoke as little as possible. What aggravated the problem also was that I 'felt' Sudanese, yet my speech was not reflecting that. Among Egyptians, I felt like a fraud, passing as one of them but being an outsider. I think that this was one of the reasons I gravitated towards expressing myself in English. It was a third language, refreshingly free from the disloyalty of having to choose between each of my parents' tongues.

You are a Muslim, yet you attended the Khartoum American School and a Catholic high school. This suggests that your parents were Westernised and weren't strict about culture and religion. Right? Wrong?

That's true. My parents were socially conservative but in terms of culture and religion, they were fairly liberal. They were also confident in their Muslim identity and didn't see the school as a threat. It was one of the best schools in Khartoum, a private girls' school. The majority of the students were Muslim. We received the same Islamic Religious education as students did in the government schools.

Many of my parents' friends were Christian and I grew up close to people from different faiths and cultures. My Ethiopian nanny used to take me with her to church to light candles. My parents knew about this and they had no objections.

In your novel, *Minaret*, published in 2005 by Grove Press, Najwa's family is westernised. How does your own family compare or contrast?

I had an upbringing similar to that of my heroine, Najwa, in *Minaret*, but I exaggerated a lot in the book. In *Minaret*, I made Najwa's journey dramatic: from being highly secular to becoming very religious, whereas my own background was kind of; in the middle. Also, unlike Najwa, I always had an instinctive shyness. I was also studious. Unlike Najwa's experience, my family's Westernisation meant education and independence. With my father's support, my mother travelled to London to do her PhD in Demography. My mother encouraged me to take all my studies seriously and in secondary school, Islamic Education became one of my favourite subjects. So, in this respect, my life was different from Najwa's. I did not have the same kind of distance she had from religion or the same kinds of freedom.

Aboulela

However, my daily life in Khartoum was a fairly liberal Westernised one (certainly in comparison to the majority of Sudanese) and I did have friends whose lives were similar to Najwa's.

You have a degree in Economics and an M.Sc. and MPhil degree in Statistics from the London School of Economics and you enjoy a celebrated career as a fiction writer. How did your journey as a creative writer begin?

It began with the failure to get a PhD in Statistics. The MPhil was the aborted PhD. This coincided with my move from Sudan to Britain and made me start to write. The sharp contrast between Khartoum and Scotland – the weather, the people, the culture - compelled me to comment, to compare and contrast, to notice absences and observe additions. I was very homesick for Khartoum and I wanted to write about a certain beauty and a certain happiness that was characteristic of a city not known for its tourist value. People around me did not know much about Sudan or about Islam, the two things that made up my identity. This increased my loneliness and feeling of exile. In addition, the anti-Arab and anti-Islam atmosphere in the media following the first Gulf war made me want to write articles and non-fiction. But I found that I didn't have the talent for doing that. Fiction was where my strength was. It was attending creative writing workshops that really spurred me on. I found a good response to my writing and encouragement to start sending off my work to publishers.

Please share some of the important moments of that journey with us?

Gaining a place on a workshop organised by BBC Radio Scotland to encourage ethnic minority writers; early reviews of my work, receiving a phone call from Becky Clarke, who was at the time the editor of the Heinemann African Writers Series, telling me that I had been short-listed for the Caine Prize. Then afterwards winning it. The fact that Ben Okri was the chair of the judges meant a great deal to me. It gave me a boost of confidence.

"An immigrant is a parent who finds out too late that she's given up her child for adoption" is a powerful statement made by the warm-hearted and stylish Reem in *Summer Maze*, which is set in Cairo, Egypt. Explain her statement using one or more of the parents featured in your book?

Immigrants imagine that their children are born with a hard-drive of memories and information about the motherland. This is not the case. For second-generation immigrants, the new country is their one and only home. The children grow up influenced by the schools they go to and the society surrounding them. Although they live together, it is as if the child has been adopted by the surrounding society.

I recently read a review of *Minaret* by Abu Sufian, a scholar at the International Islamic University of Malaysia. Sufian contends that diasporic Muslim women are subject to 'stereotyping' and 'labelling' in the West. Is that your own experience as a Muslim woman living in the United Kingdom?

Probably yes, and that is the climate surrounding my work, but I actively stop myself from thinking about how others perceive me. It does not fascinate me, and I don't think it is healthy. I too I'm busy perceiving others. I too have my own prejudices, which I have to work through on my own. In the *Elsewhere, Home* stories, the *hijab*, and to a lesser degree, the black *abaya*, enjoy plenty of visibility if not as something your women are wearing, then as an idea that your women give voice to or debate in their minds.

Do you use your writing to disabuse western readers of misconceptions about these items of clothing and other facets of Muslim culture?

I try to be true to the characters that I am writing about. I don't deliberately set out to change people's minds. I don't really believe that I can. Those who are deeply prejudiced are not going to take the trouble to read my work, anyway! There are many devout people in the world. Mosques are full, churches in Africa are full. Millions go on *Hajj* every year. These people have the same right as anyone else, to feature as characters in fiction.

Abu Sufian complains in his *Minaret* review about the growing population of so-called neo-orientalists in the West. In his words, they 'distort and misrepresent their religion and culture'. Am I right in thinking that people like Majdy in *The Ostrich* and the celebrity Arab woman writer at the centre of *Pages of Fruit* are the intended targets of Abu Sufian's attack? Is that how you conceived those two characters? As neo-orientalists?

I don't know the intended targets of the reviewer you are quoting. The 'nasty husband' in *The Ostrich* and the famous author in *Pages of Fruit* express views that are widely popular among Westerners and non-Westerners, Muslims and non-Muslims. It is the way that they are positioned in the story, which reveals them as being hurtful or at least having the potential to hurt.

Are those who reject traditional Islamic culture growing in number? Are there enough of them vocalising their views to pose a threat to the perception of Islam in the West? Before you answer, let me add that the housewife narrator privately considers the issue of 'assimilation' for migrants, acknowledging that 'assimilation' is 'debatable' and 'not politically correct'.

It's interesting that the two trends are running parallel to each other. Societies

Writing'

on the whole are moving towards modernism, becoming more Westernised, turning away from tradition. This is a result of urbanisation, more and more women joining the workforce, the shrinking of the type of manual work which suited men. At the same time, I believe that religion or at least having some kind of faith/interest in spirituality is growing. There is also more tolerance of difference. Despite some resistance and pockets of strong opposition, the West has already accepted the presence of Muslims. Islam is being practiced on a daily basis in Europe and in the U.S. The kind of assimilation that would have been expected of migrants in the 1950s or 1960s no longer exists. Nor is it perceived to be practical.

In *Elsewhere, Home*, I found your presentation of British (Scottish) women who are in relationships with Muslim/Arabic men to be very interesting. These perspectives were, I think, fairly evenly divided: white British women who are alienated from their husbands' culture and those white woman converts to Islam so culturally assimilated, they put their husbands to shame. In your experience of mixed race/mixed culture couples in the West, is that the general ratio in cultural attitudes? What have you found?

I didn't really think about it in terms of ratios. There are great variations between how mixed race/mixed nationality couple manage the differences between them. In these households the ingredient from a particular culture can vary depending on where the couples are living, their economic status and also personalities. I find this fascinating. To what extent a wife or husband assimilates into their partner's culture is interesting to observe.

Most people in mixed race/mixed culture relationships are also in love with their partners' culture. When they are not, it is problematic for the relationship and can cause loneliness as can be seen in *Souvenirs*. Yassir, the young man who works on the North Sea old-rigs, sees his Scottish wife, Emma, as a lifeline to his new life. 'She welcomed me in. I was on the periphery and she let me in'. When she refuses to go with him to Sudan, he begins to see Sudan through her eyes and to feel ashamed of his background. At the same time, he loves his country and his family. He sees the beauty of what he has left behind but he lacks confidence that he can convince his wife, Emma, of this beauty. It is a beauty that cannot be conveyed in photographs. This is why he shies away from taking the photographs he promised her he would bring back.

You expose not only the weakness of the cultural status of children raised in the Western diaspora, you pay special attention to children of bi-racial/bi-cultural heritage. You present the choice to adopt Islam as – ultimately - the only thing that can give this demographic group the direction, sense of identity and rootedness they lack. First, talk to us about this issue. Then talk to us about the value of a mentor (like Reem in *Summer Maze*) for these kinds of children.

I don't see them as 'adopting' Islam as it is part of their own tradition or that of their spouse. Instead I follow the option of holding on to it as much as they can, appreciating its value. Not as a solution to their problems but as a way of seeing the world, nourishing their spirituality, gaining wisdom and connecting with their Creator. Mentors, teachers and guides play a role throughout my novels and short stories. Sometimes the relationship is brief, it lights a spark as in the case of Reem, the cousin's fiancé in *Summer Maze*. Or it can be more long-term as in my novel, *The Kindness of Enemies*.

Now to your white men! I found the brilliant, humble, gallant Bryan, in The *Museum*, very touching. I was rooting for this working class Scottish boy who wants 'to get away'. I wanted his budding romance with Shadia to succeed. Shadia is a Sudanese post- graduate living the typically insular life of overseas students at a British University. *The Museum* went on to win the first ever Caine Prize in 2000. What inspired the story and the characters?

I had visited a gallery in Aberdeen, the same one described in the story, because I wanted to use it as a setting in my novel, *The Translator*, which I was writing at the time. My reaction to the gallery was negative and I decided not to use it in my novel. At the same time, I resented the time wasted on the research. A friend suggested that I use the research for writing a separate short story. So, I came up with characters to match the setting. The character of Shadia was based on a young African woman I saw standing in front of me at the check in counter at Aberdeen airport. She was slim and graceful, her hair was tied back in a bun. I assumed she was a student. The rest of the story was inspired by my own experience of doing an MSc. in Statistics at the London School of Economics.

You have visited Nigeria once or twice, I believe. I know that in 2017, you headlined Kabafest, which like the Ake Festival, is hosted by Lola Shoneyin's Book Buzz Foundation and held in Kaduna. Tell us about your experience headlining the festival?

It was a very positive experience. There was a great deal of enthusiasm and love of reading. All the events were full. There was nowhere to sit. The panels were lively. The audiences were fully engaged. The bookshop was running out of books to sell. It was a successful festival and I was proud to headline the first edition.

You recently won the Saltire Literary Award 2018 (in the fiction category)? The Saltire is the leading literary award in Scotland. Where were you when you got the wonderful news? Lead us into that moment.

I went to the award ceremony in Edinburgh knowing only that I was short-listed. There were many other awards announced on that evening e.g. for history book of the year, academic, non-fiction etc. The first winners who stood up to collect their awards and make an acceptance speech seemed so confident and prepared that I assumed they had been told prior to the event. This led me to assume that I hadn't won as I hadn't received any information from the organisers. So, when *Elsewhere, Home* was announced as a winner, I was surprised but of course very happy.

You are a Scottish Laureate for Literature. How does that make you feel?

It's a huge honour. I came to Scotland when I was 26 years old. I arrived at Aberdeen airport with a four-year-old son, a two-week-old baby and a husband working on the oil rigs. Two years later, I started to write. My writing is attached and connected to Scotland. My very first story was published by Chapman, a Scottish literary magazine and my first novel, *The Translator*, was published by a Scottish publisher. So, it feels right in many ways to win a Scottish prize!

And finally, what now? Any projects in the pipeline?

My new novel, *Bird Summons*, is going to be published in March. It's about three Muslim women who go on a journey to the Scottish Highlands. The novel is inspired by Attar's fable, *The Conference of the Birds*. The women want to visit the grave of Lady Evelyn Cobbold, the first British woman to complete the pilgrimage to Mecca. Like the birds in Attar's fable, the women face challenges before they can achieve spiritual growth. Lucy Ellmann, who has already kindly read it, describes it as, "A magic carpet ride into the forest of history and the lives of women. Deep and wild."

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Prof (Mrs) Victoria Akpata, Professor Samuel Akpata, Engr. Solomon Uwaifo, the Chief launcher and Chief Arthur Mbanefo, chairman of the occasion displaying the book

Akpatas Celebrate 50 Years Of Marriage, Launch Memoir

By **Dominica Okpara**

On Saturday, December 29, 2018, Prof. Enosakhare Samuel Akpata and Prof. (Mrs) Victoria Akpata celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary with a dinner at the Metropolitan Club, Victoria Island, Lagos.

Samuel Akpata, who is a retired professor of dentistry, got married to his heartthrob, Victoria, a retired professor of Microbiology, in December 1968.

The event, which attracted high networthh guests such as, Chief Arthur Mbanefo, former Nigerian Representative at the United Nations, who chaired the occasion, Professor (Chief) Osato Giwa-Osagie, Professor T.A. Junaid, Right Reverend George Bako, Retired Bishop of Lokoja (Anglican Church of Nigeria), Solomon Uwaifo, chief launcher of the book, Air Vice Marshall Joe Ehigie (Rtd), Professor Gabriel Osuide, pioneer Director-General of NAFDAC and Dr. Edugie Abebe, climaxed with the unveiling of a book by Prof. Samuel Akpata, titled, *Sand, Sun and Surprises*. The memoir focuses on his experiences while living and working in the Middle East (Saudi Arabia and Kuwait) for 23 years.

Prof Akpata worked at the University of Lagos for 21 years before he moved over to King Saud University in Saudi Arabia where he taught for 13 years and then to Kuwait University for 10 years, all as professor of restorative dentistry. When he returned to Nigeria, he also worked at the Lagos State University for about three years.

Speaking on what motivated him to write the book, he said, "after working in the Middle East for 23 years, I returned to my country, Nigeria in 2011. In conversations with friends at home and abroad, a topic that invariably came up was about my experiences in the Middle East. Some of them have found it astonishing that I was able to survive in Arab countries for that length of time, considering the quaint stories that they had heard about the region. Others have been curious and wanted tips on life in the Middle East, in case they emigrate, or needed to advise others who had similar plans. Hence, I decided to write this memoir."

The book, according to the erudite professor, will appeal to people who intend to go and work in the Middle East, those who want to visit the region on holidays and people in the Middle East who wish to know what expatriates think of them.

Commenting on the factors that contributed to the success of his marriage, Prof Akpata said, "the key thing in our own case is openness. We discuss issues even with the children. When the children were with us, we had our meals together at least twice a day. We sat at table together during breakfast and dinner. If there is any issue between us as a couple, we allow each person to talk about it. We have never gone to a third party to settle any matter. We feel that there is no issue we cannot iron out between us."

Asked to advise younger women about the most important things about marriage, Prof (Mrs) Akpata said, "the important thing is to understand that marriage is a team work. You are not related, you are coming from different homes, if there are ways you did things in your own home when you get to the man's house, you must recognise that he is the head of the family. As a sportsperson at school, I am a team player, you don't just do everything for yourself in a team, you must consider the entire team. Otherwise, your team won't win. In marriage, you must realise that you are not alone, so everything can't be according to your own wish. If you are sensible, you will know that your husband and the people around him are important. You don't just say, he is my husband, so father, mother, brothers, sisters, friends, go to blazes. No, it doesn't work that way. If you want to be happy, you must look at the environment holistically and behave properly. If you are new in a place, you study the new environment and try and fit in. In our culture and most cultures in the world, it is the responsibility of the wife to make her husband and people around him like her. You must put yourself in a position to be liked. You try and study the man, you research him. There is no equality in this business, the family must be based on love and respect.

The Akpatas have three sons and six grandchildren.