

## Mystical and Archetypal Journeys in Leila Aboulela's *Bird Summons*

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**Abstract:** This article aims at exploring the significance of intertwining the mystical and the archetypal journey structures in Leila Aboulela's novel, *Bird Summons* (2019). It highlights the author's indebtedness to Islamic Sufi tradition and shows how she appropriates Farid ud-din Attar's mystical pilgrimage of the seven valleys to a postmodern context where three Arab-British female characters attain spiritual transcendence. On the other hand, the article employs Joseph Campbell's structure of the archetypal journey narratives to explicate the relationship between the narrative structure and the author's chief thematic concerns. Campbell's seventeen stages of the "Monomyth," or the "hero's journey," illuminate Aboulela's proficient projection of the characters' spiritual quest in their physical movement from the city into the forest. England performs a cultural contact zone which entices the protagonists to overcome their identity crises caused by traumatic experiences, acute sense of displacement, and nostalgia. The success of their physical journey to Lady Evelyn Cobbold's grave functions as an allegory for the redemptive impact of spirituality which ultimately empowers them to become more functional individuals and to integrate into English society. The study concludes that Aboulela's deliberate fusion of Islamic journey structure with a Western one attests to the author's belief in the universality of Islam and the possibility of religious tolerance and intercultural coexistence.

**Keywords:** Attar, *Bird Summons*, Campbell, Islam, journey, Leila Aboulela

### 1. Introduction

Leila Aboulela is a contemporary Anglophone novelist, dramatist, and short story writer. Most of her works revolve around Muslim women experiences in diaspora. Inspired by her own migration from Sudan to Scotland, she authored a number of widely acclaimed novels including *The Translator* (1999), *Minaret* (2005), *Lyrics Alley* (2011), *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015), *Bird Summons* (2019), and *River Spirit* (2023). In the words of Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett (219: 1), Aboulela's "lyrical works [examine] homesickness, grief and the liminal nature of immigrant identities." Aboulela's literary output sheds light on the challenges which encounter Arab Muslims in the West regarding their cultural identity. In the recent years, she has become one of the distinguished female voices in the Arab Anglophone discourse in Britain whose "presence is highly visible, vivid and indelible" (Al Maleh 2009: 13). Her efforts to explore these challenges through an Anglophone

lens also group Aboulela with other contemporary Middle Eastern writers who tackle similar themes related to their hyphenated identity and the challenges of diaspora, such as Ahdaf Soueif, Elif Shafak, Isabella Hamed, Hisham Matar, and Laila Lalami.

The claim that Aboulela's fiction provides an arena for redeeming the distorted image of her mother country, Sudan, is a reductive one. She does not use her fiction solely as a platform for relinquishing the misconceptions about and misrepresentations of Islam and Muslims. In fact, Aboulela's literary concerns encompass a wider range of interests. In "Leila Aboulela and the Ideology of Muslim Immigrant Fiction," Wail S. Hassan (2008: 298) argues that "[l]ike Salih, Aboulela is preoccupied with migration between North and South, cultural perceptions and stereotypes, and the possibilities of building bridges between former colonizer and colonized." In spite of her inevitable affinity with Tayeb Salih with whom she shares her Sudanese nationality and some of her fictional concerns, Aboulela belongs to a younger generation of authors who wish to "articulate an alternative vision" about the challenges of postcolonial nationhood; this renders her "less concerned with reversing, rewriting, or answering back to colonial discourse than with attempting an epistemological break with it" (Hassan 2008: 299). In the same vein, Charles Campbell (2019: 67) justifies the pressing need for a more "imaginative vision" by arguing that "the clash of civilizations thesis is reactionary, dangerous and impossible of realization (i.e., an illusion) since it would require us to travel back in time. A vision of intercultural synthesis is called for." Aboulela's advocacy of the need for "intercultural synthesis" rather than emphasizing antithetical conflicts manifests itself in many of her works.

Aboulela's bicultural background evidently informs her ideological stance and inevitably immerses her in the debate about the adequate East/West intercultural narrative. Her fiction saturates with Islamic spirituality which emanates from her belief in the universality of Islam and her duty to reflect what she believes to be its real image in her writings. She directs her creative energies towards explicating its tenets from the perspective of a liberal Muslim who lives in the West and strongly believes in the essential role of spirituality especially in secular environments. Her narratives about Muslims in the West demonstrate the new temperament in story-telling described by Nathan Funk and Abdul Aziz Said (2004:1) who observe that

The relationship between Islam and the West is accompanied by a great deal of story-telling, by Muslims and Westerners alike. The themes of these stories are familiar: some speak of political confrontation and inherent incompatibility between Islamic and Western civilizations, while others speak of common historical roots, cultural compatibility, and political accommodation. While much can be learned from listening to these two varieties of tales, we have reached a point where the old narratives no longer suffice, and we find ourselves in need of a third story. We are truly between stories – between the stories of the past and the story which we must now create together.

In some of her novels, Aboulela's unpoliticized depiction of Islam promotes for cultural compatibility and the possibility of harmonious coexistence in spite of diversity and ethnic prejudices. Her novels perform different variations of her several fictional attempts to build cultural bridges between East and West. In the words of Ferial Ghazoul (2001: n.p.) in an interview, Aboulela's fiction aspires "to join South to North under the emblem of a universal quest, that of Islamic humanism". In other novels like *The Kindness of Enemies* and *River Spirit*, however, Aboulela's representation of Islam is clearly infused with her political views and socio-historical commentary.

Pertinent to the needs of this study is to investigate the historical construction of the Sufi Islamic presence in Britain, and by extension the West, which proved to be intricate and manifold. *Sufism in Britain* explores the historical development of Sufism in Britain, highlighting "the dynamism, fluidity, and diversity of the British Sufi scene . . . demonstrating both the significance of the Sufi option for expressing contemporary spirituality within a traditional format and the complexity of Sufi responses to the highly charged world of Islamic diversity" (Geaves 2013:13). In this regard, in "Learning the lessons from the neo-revivalist and Wahhabi movements: the counterattack of the new Sufi movements in the UK," Ron Geaves (2006:156) argues that "reformist movements" in Britain took place due to multiple factors, among which is the non-traditional attitude of younger generations of British Sufi Muslims. Geaves (2006:156) states:

It is unlikely that the old traditional practices associated with rural 'folk' and 'popular' religion can survive beyond the first-generation migrants. Their children will seek to adapt Islamic belief and practice to the life in Britain; in this context reformed Sufi organizations will be able to compete with the revivalists of the Islamic movement by drawing upon traditional family allegiances to the Ahl-i Sunna wajama'at but also by matching them in providing a form of organization more suited to the needs and aspirations of the British context.

In the light of this argument, we argue that Aboulela's *Bird Summons* reflects the contemporary scene and latest version of Sufi Islam in Britain, which came as a result of multiple attempts at reform and revival, and thus departing from strict traditional Sufi beliefs and practices and bringing about a more tolerant and less violent Sufi presence in the multi-national, multi-cultural, and multi-ethnic British context. In other words, Aboulela's novel corresponds to more flexible approaches to Sufism in contemporary Britain which seek to achieve reform in the British community by bringing together various Muslim and non-Muslim groups who are more united than divided due to their shared spirituality. Yousef Awad (2018: 87) evaluates Aboulela's representation of Sufism in *The Kindness of Enemies* and argues that it is considered "the counterpoint of radical Islam and extremist Muslim movements." In the British context of ethnic and cultural diversity, Aboulela's advocacy of unity, tolerance, and coexistence is crystal clear.

In *Bird Summons*, Aboulela explores the relationship between the transformative powers of performing a spiritual pilgrimage and the characters' ability to attain successful accommodations in the British community. The plot

revolves around three Muslim immigrant women, each coming from a different Arab country. The novel depicts their journey to Lady Evelyn Cobbold's grave, the first British woman to perform pilgrimage to Mecca. During the journey, the three women struggle against their identity crises and undergo different transformational experiences which help them establish transnational relations among them as well as cross-cultural relations with others in Britain. Away from the burdens and restrictions of patriarchy, city life, motherhood and wifehood, they experience freedom in the forest and establish a better connection with their Islamic spirituality. Their journey represents a spiritual quest which enables them to untangle the intricacy of their socio-cultural situations, recover from their previous traumatic experiences, and overcome their identity crises. Subsequently, the three women's transformation and triumphant emergence from the forest relinquish their acute sense of estrangement and empowers them to better integrate in British society. In this context, Aboulela's epistemological break with the colonial discourse manifests itself in the characters' ability to transcend the current cultural tension they feel in Britain and in her focus on the prospective reconciliation.

This article aims at exploring the significance of intertwining the mystical and the archetypal journey structures in Aboulela's novel, *Bird Summons*. It highlights the author's indebtedness to Islamic Sufi tradition and shows how she appropriates Farid ud-din Attar's mystical pilgrimage of the seven valleys to a postmodern context where three Arab-British female characters attain spiritual transcendence. On the other hand, the article employs Joseph Campbell's structure of the archetypal journey narratives to explicate the relationship between the narrative structure and the author's chief thematic concerns. Campbell's seventeen stages of the "Monomyth," or the "hero's journey," illuminate Aboulela's proficient projection of the characters' spiritual quest in their physical movement from the city into the forest. England performs a cultural contact zone which entices the protagonists to overcome their identity crises caused by traumatic experiences, acute sense of displacement, and nostalgia. The success of their physical journey to Lady Evelyn Cobbold's grave functions as an allegory for the redemptive impact of spirituality which ultimately empowers them to become more functional individuals and to integrate into English society. The article concludes that Aboulela's deliberate fusion of Islamic journey structure with a Western one attests to the author's belief in the universality of Islam and the possibility of religious tolerance and intercultural coexistence.

In *Bird Summons*, Aboulela purposefully establishes an artistic narrative construction which yields simultaneously to mystical and archetypal plot structures. On the one hand, she declares her indebtedness to medieval Islamic Sufism as a source of inspiration in the acknowledgments' section. In chapter 16 of the novel, the Hoopoe makes a direct reference to Attar's *The Conference of the Birds* and tells the story of the birds' journey to find their king, the Simorgh. He tells them this story directly after they accept him as the guide who "could lead the way to salvation" (Aboulela 2019: 259). On the other hand, *Bird Summons'* plot structure features several stages of the archetypal myth of the hero's journey proposed by Campbell. The archetypal structure manifests itself in the unmistakable match

between the seventeen stages of Campbell's Momomyth and the novel's seventeen chapters. The primordial nature of the archetypal structure reflects its spatial and temporal adaptability to a wide array of universal truths and individual experiences regardless of their cultural contexts. Aboulela parallels the characters' physical journey with an introspective spiritual one in order to achieve her fictional purposes. The significance of combining mystical and archetypal journey narratives in *Bird Summons* stems from the author's ability to manipulate different structures to achieve her artistic goals and to convey her messages in nonverbal means.

## 2. The mystical journey structure

### 2.1 Farid ud-din Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*

Farid ud-din Attar is considered one of the most famous Persian mystical poets in the Islamic Sufi tradition. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, he wrote his renowned epic poem *Mantiq al-Tayr* or *The Conference of the Birds* which performs an extended allegory for the mystic's quest for the Divine Light of God. Ayfer Summermatter (2016:118) clarifies that "[a]ccording to Sufism, a human's real mission in the universe is to reveal the secrets of the divine in the self by performing good deeds in line with what the Creator has determined, and thus reach spiritual perfection, attain the reality of oneness, and arrive at the Truth." Attar borrowed the title *Mantiq al-Tayr* from the Holy Qur'an, Surat An-Naml which reads "[a]nd David was succeeded by Solomon, who said, O people! We have been taught the language of birds, and been given everything we need. This is indeed a great privilege" (The Quran 27:16). Attar also borrows the idea of the Hoopoe bird as a spiritual mentor from Qur'anic verses which recount this bird's wisdom and services to King Solomon. The vital role of the spiritual guide is at the heart of medieval Sufism since it guarantees the proper guidance for mystics to the straight path of God. Hence, the Shaikh shoulders the responsibility of showing his disciples this path. Attar's style performs an emulation of the supernatural anecdotes of the Holy Qur'an in his heavy reliance on magical happenings and surreal elements.

Attar allegorizes the mystic's journey towards spiritual transcendence and enlightenment in the story of the Hoopoe which guides a huge number of birds to the top of Mount Qaf to meet the Simorgh, the King of Birds. The Hoopoe explains to the birds following him the perilous nature of the journey and lists the seven valleys they have to cross before reaching their destination:

"Before we reach our goal," the hoopoe said,  
 "The journey's seven valleys lie ahead;  
 How far this is the world has never learned,  
 For no one who has gone there has returned –  
 Impatient bird, who would retrace this trail?  
 There is no messenger to tell the tale,  
 And they are lost to our concerns below –  
 How can men tell you what they do not know?  
 The first stage is the Valley of the Quest;  
 Then Love's wide valley is our second test;  
 The third is Insight into Mystery,

The fourth Detachment and Serenity –  
 The fifth is Unity; the sixth is Awe,  
 A deep Bewilderment unknown before,  
 The seventh Poverty and Nothingness (Attar 1984: 113).

The Valley of Quest requires the birds to encounter “misfortune” and “trouble” which challenge them to proceed in this arduous journey and to “renounce the world,” “power,” and all they own (Attar 1984:113). In order to advance in this spiritual path, the birds need to have patience and endure pain. The second stage is the Valley of Love where the birds prove their utter commitment to the cause; “Love here is fire” and the “lover is a man who flares and burns” and flies in distressed circles in his search for the “absent nest” of the Beloved (Attar 1984: 117-118). According to Attar, the path to God involves the purification of the lover’s soul and the refinement of *an-nafs al-’ammārah* which incites man to commit evil. He compares *an-nafs al-’ammārah* to “a stray dog squabbling for a bone” (Attar 1984: 33) and asserts that “the discipline of the soul” is an essential requirement for those who aspire to “gain the Simorgh” (Attar 1984: 29).

The valley of Insight to Mystery follows and it leads to the knowledge that the paths in this valley are abundant; no path is similar to another. Therefore, the pathways to God are as numerous as the number of mystic wayfarers or *Salikin*. Attar (1984: 29) wonders “[h]ow many countless hundred thousands pray/ For patience and true knowledge of the Way/ That leads to Him whom reason cannot claim, /Nor mortal purity describe or name. When they reach the Valley of Detachment and Serenity, the birds experience an increasing separation from the material world and a total surrender to the will and magnificence of God. Summermatter (2016:131) explains that the mystic is passive in accepting the divine will of God, yet active in his spiritual transcendence.

In the Valley of Unity, “the Hoopoe announces that although you may see many beings, in reality there is only one, which is complete in its unity. As long as you are separate, good and evil will arise, but when you lose yourself in the divine essence, they will be transcended by love” (Attar 1984: 122). This is the stage when the struggle between body and soul is resolved and the birds feel empowered by the core of their essence which they derive from the light of God rather than temporary forces (Summermatter 2016:134). When the Valley of Bewilderment is traversed, the birds feel bewildered by the beauty of the Beloved; however, they experience extreme disappointment when they realize the limitations of their knowledge and understanding (Summermatter 2016:136). The birds’ awareness of the limitations of worldly knowledge forces them to search further for the straight path which they have lost. The birds start exploring their relationship with their Creator in a new way in spite of the overwhelming sense of awe and amazement which takes hold of them. Only thirty birds manage to reach the final Valley of Poverty and Nothingness after overcoming several trials and challenges. Attar (1984:114) describes their wish to proceed and to find the light of God to the moth which is attracted to the flames of fire; “[t]he pilgrim driven on by his desire /Will like a moth rush gladly on the fire.” When the Simorgh’s palace gate opens for the surviving birds, they see in the mirror that they are the Simorgh. This is the final stage of the mystic’s

spiritual transcendence where the self is totally annihilated and lost in the Divine essence and where he attains his complete spiritual ascendance.

## **2.2 Bird Summons as a fictional appropriation of *The Conference of the Birds***

Discerning Aboulela's fictional appropriation of Attar's epic poem does not pose a real challenge for those who are familiar with Sufi parlance. Words like journey, pilgrim, path, guide, transcendence, mountain, Divine Light, and many other Sufi expressions pervade Aboulela's narrative. Her narrative construction comprises a number of frame stories where the pilgrimage constitutes the unifying frame for all of them. She borrows this narrative technique from Attar's *The Conference of the Birds* which includes several anecdotes about the mystic's journey towards transcendence. Storytelling in Sufism is a defining feature in which Sufi poets and philosophers emulate the parables of Qur'an to relate spiritual messages in an allegorical way.

Aboulela foregrounds the mystical structure at the outset of the novel as the three friends decide to embark on a quest to Lady Evelyn Cobbold's grave. The fact that the grave is located in the Scottish Highland is significant for it symbolizes the characters' strenuous ascending; they had to climb a mountainous land and to walk through a "path [that] was muddy and often there were rocks" (Aboulela 2019: 271). The image of the ascending mountainous road continues throughout the novel to indicate the perilous nature of the journey. The questers' renunciation of their worldly interests becomes manifest when they depart from their families; they manage to completely detach themselves when they "[get] away from it all. Away from responsibility, away from authority, bodies set free from routines, perspectives altered, distances distracting" (Aboulela 2019: 36). The mystic transcends the material world in order to connect with the Divine.

In the novel, several characters assume the role of the spiritual mentor; Lady Evelyn, Salma, and the Hoopoe provide guidance for others. The Hoopoe states "there comes a point, around three quarters of the way through, when the traveler, without a guide, can go no further" (Aboulela 2019: 259). As a result, the three travelers accept him as a guide and ask him "show us the way" (Aboulela 2019: 260). The Hoopoe's claim proves to be valid since he helps them restore their human bodies in a miraculous way and they proceed towards the grave (Aboulela 2019: 264). The characters' magical transformations and the Hoopoe's supernatural powers are clear resonances of Attar's surreal stories. Throughout the journey, the Hoopoe's support for Iman in particular reflects the mystic's need for guidance. Aboulela portrays Iman's struggle against *an-nafs al-'ammārah* using Attarian terms when she projects this struggle in the dog chasing Iman in the forest. When Iman stumbles and falls in the forest, it is the Hoopoe who urges her to "stand up" and to continue (Aboulela 2019: 226).

Prior to the arrival of the travelers to the grave, Aboulela sketches an important magical scene which performs a perfect dramatization of the novel's main fictional concerns. The roads of the three Muslim women and a Christian believer intersect and they meet in a monastery. Nathan is a medieval Christian who appears in one of the Hoopoe's stories. He pays penance for his sins by performing

a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The narrator describes the feelings of the three Muslim women:

They recognized him as one of them, a believer, though he had not lived long enough to know the Last Prophet, nor to hear the final revelation. They had in common with him the knowledge of their Creator, the desire to seek forgiveness, the trajectory of slip and rise, the journeying to come close. They understood him, and he would have understood them too, if he had lived in their own time. The similarity between them was more than the difference. (Aboulela 2019: 267)

This magical scene allows the author to fulfill her wish of achieving religious tolerance between Muslims and Christians. She wishes to go back in time to wipe out the long history of bigotry and prejudice. Nathan's monastery performs Aboulela's fictional arena where the believers of different religions can worship the same Creator peacefully because they focus on what unites them rather than what makes them different. The women recite verses from Qur'an in the monastery. In this regard, Sufism's influence on Aboulela becomes evident when the narrator says that the "paths might be infinite, but the destination one" (Aboulela 2019: 267).

Following the Attarian model where only the strongest birds manage to reach the Simorgh's palace, only Salma makes it to Lady Evelyn's Grave. "Allah is the light" is engraved on the tomb upon the request of Lady Evelyn. The pilgrim reaches the ultimate point of his spiritual transcendence when he realizes that Allah is the source of light in this universe. Like the thirty birds in Attar's epic, Salma sees her own reflection at the end of her pilgrimage. This marks the annihilation of her former subjectivity and her identification with the Divine.

### **3. The archetypal journey structure**

#### **3.1 Joseph Campbell's monomyth**

In his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, first published in (1949), the twentieth-century philosopher and mythologist Joseph Campbell explores the structure of the journey of the archetypal hero found in world myths. He argues that mythological narratives share a fundamental structure, and that the hero's journey narrative pattern recurs throughout cultures, transcending time and place. Campbell (1984:114) clarifies the similarities between world myths and proposes the structure of the Monomyth in which a "hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man."

Following the motif of the archetypal hero myth, Campbell describes seventeen stages which he classifies under three general phases: "Departure" or "Separation," "Initiation," and "Return." Campbell (2004b:33) "follow[s], therefore, a multitude of heroic figures through the classic stages of the universal adventure" to reveal the pattern of the hero's journey which usually follows a cycle in which the hero departs from the normal world that he/she knows to the world of the unknown. According to Campbell's Monomyth, world mythologies are a variation of the journey of the archetypal hero. Monomyths do not necessarily follow all the

seventeen stages outlined by Campbell, for “there will be found astonishingly little variation in the morphology of the adventure, the character roles involved, the victories gained. If one or another of the basic elements of the archetypal pattern is omitted from a given fairy tale, legend, ritual, or myth, it is bound to be somehow or other implied—and the omission itself can speak volumes for the history and pathology of the example” (Campbell 2004b: 35-6).

In “The Adventure of the Hero,” Part I of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell outlines and explains the seventeen stages of the Monomyth. In the first chapter of this part, he explains the subdivisions of the first stage. This stage starts with the “Call for Adventure” in which the hero who lives in the normal world responds to a call to start an adventure to the unknown that is characterized by darkness and danger. According to Campbell, the adventure which the hero decides to undertake is arduous and perilous as it takes place in a dangerous place like the forest. Campbell (2004b: 47) states that “[t]ypical of the circumstances of the call are the dark forest, the great tree, the babbling spring, and the loathly, underestimated appearance of the carrier of the power of destiny.”

Campbell adds that a “Refusal of the Call” might happen as the hero sometimes refuses or hesitates to undertake the adventure. Campbell explains the negative consequences of refusing the call because it means refusing to advance in life. “Refusal of the summons converts the adventure into its negative” (Campbell 2004b: 54) as “the refusal is essentially a refusal to give up what one takes to be one’s own interest” (Campbell 2004b: 55). Once the hero accepts the call, however, he/she receives “Supernatural Aid” from a wizard, hermit, teacher, or ferryman whose job is to protect the hero particularly in the first part of the journey (Campbell 2004b: 66). The “Supernatural Aid” is important to the hero as it serves to instill comfort and confidence in the hero’s mind. What comes after is the “Crossing of the First Threshold” which demarcates the normal world and the supernatural one. This liminal place is guarded by a “threshold guardian” who represents a “deceitful and dangerous presence” (Campbell 2004b: 71); this thwarts the hero’s attempt to move ahead and face the danger. Passing the guardian means leaving the hero’s ordinary community or normal world and entering a new world which is governed by different laws. Hence, the hero enters what Campbell calls “the Belly of the Whale.” Campbell clarifies that “[t]he idea that the passage of the magical threshold is a transit into a sphere of rebirth is symbolized in the worldwide womb image of the belly of the whale. The hero, instead of conquering or conciliating the power of the threshold, is swallowed into the unknown, and would appear to have died” (Campbell 2004b: 83). Here, the hero is metaphorically reborn through undergoing a metamorphosis or transformation which initiates him into a new state of being.

In the second chapter of the same part, Campbell explains the second stage which is “Initiation.” This stage starts after traversing the aforementioned threshold. The hero goes through a “Road of Trials” which comprises a series of challenges and obstacles that the hero faces and manages to overcome (Campbell 2004b: 89). There, he/she comes across a “Spiritual Labyrinth” which is populated by “Symbolic Figures” (Campbell 2004b: 92). At this stage, the hero relinquishes his old self and becomes “cleansed and humbled” and “more concentrated on

transcendental things” (Campbell 2004b: 93). What follows overcoming all the obstacles is “the Meeting of the Goddess” which is “a mystical marriage of the triumphant hero-soul with the Queen Goddess of the World” (Campbell 2004b: 100). The next stage is “The Woman as Temptress” which represents the physical pleasures that distract the hero from following his quest. In this respect, Campbell (2004b: 111) maintains that “the woman is life, the hero its knower and master. . . . Nevertheless, every failure to cope with a life situation must be laid, in the end, to a restriction of consciousness.”

Later, Campbell mentions the “Atonement with the Father” which is the central point of the journey through which the hero confronts whatever represents the ultimate power in his life. The encounter with the Father stands for initiation by symbolically leaving the safety of the Mother and being exposed to the world of the Father. Campbell (2004b: 125) writes that “[w]hen the child outgrows the popular idyl of the mother breast and turns to face the world of specialized adult action, it passes, spiritually, into the sphere of the [F]ather - who becomes, for his son, the sign, of the future task, and for his daughter, of the future husband.” “Apotheosis” comes next. This stage stands for the hero’s moment of epiphany where he/she achieves a greater understanding of himself and of the world. Campbell (2004b: 139) states that the hero goes “beyond the last terrors of ignorance.” Once the hero gets over his past fear, he/she eventually receives “The Ultimate Boon” which represents the achievement of the goal of the quest and the reward for the hero’s transcendence and newly-gained wisdom.

The third chapter details the “Return” stage. This stage starts with a “Refusal to Return” because the hero has attained everything he desired, namely bliss and enlightenment. However, the hero must return to the ordinary world to share his wisdom with everyone. “The Magic Flight” is the hero’s journey home which might be as much adventurous and dangerous as his journey towards the unknown. Campbell (2004b: 182) asserts that “[t]his flight may be complicated by marvels of magical obstruction and evasion.” If the hero fails to return by himself, he might need assistants or guides to bring him/her back to the ordinary world; this is what Campbell (2004b: 192) calls the “Rescue from Without.” This transition is difficult but inevitable. On the way back, the hero undergoes “The Crossing of the Return Threshold” which marks his return to the ordinary world. At this stage, the hero must retain the wisdom he or she has gained in the quest and integrate it into his or her life and maybe share it with the rest of the world. This is called the “Application of the Boon.” In this regard, Campbell (2004b: 296) illustrates that “the hero’s first task is to experience consciously the antecedent stages of the cosmogonic cycle; to break back through the epochs of emanation. His second, then, is to return from that abyss to the plane of contemporary life, there to serve as a human transformer of demiurgic potentials.” Hence, the hero expresses what he/she learned to the normal world which might not be ready to hear it. The hero struggles to pass his new learned knowledge to his normal world.

The last stage of the hero’s journey is the “Freedom to Live.” This last stage has to do with the freedom to live without excessive attachment to the physical world and to daily life. After all, the ultimate purpose of the hero’s journey is to

maintain balance between the physical and the spiritual. Campbell (2004b: 221) here states that “[t]he goal of the myth is to dispel the need for such life ignorance by effecting a reconciliation of the individual consciousness with the universal will.” This helps the hero to function harmoniously in the universe since the individuals who succumb to their fears and limitations lack poise and spiritual fulfillment.

In his book, *Pathways to Bliss: Mythology and Personal Transformation* (2004a), Campbell illustrates the basic function of archetypal myths; he believes they help each individual through the journey of life by providing him with a kind of guidance to reach fulfillment or what he terms “bliss.” For Campbell, many of the world’s most powerful myths support the individual’s heroic path towards bliss. In the introduction to the book, he insists “follow your bliss” (2004a: xxv) as he believes that “[y]our bliss can guide you to that transcendent mystery, because bliss is the welling up of the energy of the transcendent wisdom within you” (2004a: xxvi). By studying the struggles, transformations, and redemptions of the great heroes, we come closer to discovering the universal truths of the human condition and unraveling the potential within us.

### 3.2 Monomyths in *Bird Summons*

#### 3.2.1 Departure

In *Bird Summons*, Aboulela’s episodic narrative structure features several stages of Campbell’s journey narrative pattern and a number of Monomyths. As far as the “Departure” part of the journey is concerned, the novel starts with three female protagonists who declare their wish to embark on a journey. Salma, Moni, and Iman decide to depart from the city in search for an adventure in the forest in order to visit the grave of Lady Evelyn Cobbold. They respond to “The Call to Adventure” in which “destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown” (Campbell 2004b: 53). The title of the novel clearly indicates this stage of summoning where the characters are lured to abandon the complacency of their ordinary life and to explore something beyond. The three female characters are “fellow travelers, summoned by Fate” as well as faith (Aboulela 2019: 20).

Aboulela foregrounds the spiritual nature of the journey at the outset of the novel: “the purpose of the visit—to honor Lady Evelyn Cobbold, the first British woman to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca, to educate themselves about the history of Islam in Britain, to integrate better by following the example of those who were of this soil and of their faith, those for whom this island was an inherited rather than adopted home” (Aboulela 2019: 1). The trio travelers’ road trip to the Scottish Highlands to visit the grave parallels Lady Evelyn’s own pilgrimage to Mecca to perform the rituals of Hajj. Performing the rituals of Islamic pilgrimage requires physical effort to attain spiritual transcendence. Interestingly, these Muslim women reconnect with their Islamic spirituality through a pilgrimage in Scotland rather than Mecca. This act attests to their desire to be in touch with a Western figure who embraced Islam and practiced its rituals in Scotland. In addition to cultural and religious tolerance, the three characters crave for “a role model” to emulate in her

ability to stand for her religious beliefs; “she is the mother Scottish Islam and we need her as our role model” (Aboulela 2019:2). Lady Evelyn Cobbold’s existence and experience validate the universality of Islam. More importantly, this indicates the possibility of harmonious integration for Muslims in Western communities.

The religious nature of Lady Evelyn Cobbold’s journey is in line with Campbell’s Monomyth since her spiritual experience inspires others in her society. Campbell emphasizes the spiritual dimension of the quest since he expects the hero to achieve a certain insight at the end of the journey and to pass it to others. He argues that “the hero of the fairy tale achieves a domestic, microcosmic triumph, and the hero of myth a world-historical, macrocosmic triumph” (Campbell 2004b: 35). He elaborates that ordinary heroes manage to overcome their personal predicaments after the adventure while greater heroes bring back “the means for the regeneration of [their] society as a whole” (Campbell 2004b: 35). In addition to the heroes of classical myths, Campbell refers to religious figures in mainstream religions such as Mohammad, Buddha, and Christ and considers them to be heroes of “macrocosmic triumph” due to the widespread influence of their spiritual teachings. Although Lady Evelyn Cobbold’s inspirational pilgrimage to Mecca does not have a macrocosmic influence, it definitely motivates Salma, Moni, and Iman to follow in her footsteps in order to overcome their inability to achieve a successful integration in British society.

Aboulela’s three female characters feature clear symptoms of identity crises as a result of their sense of displacement, alienation, and past traumas. Their feelings of entrapment highlight the necessity and the urgency of the journey. Salma, a middle-aged Egyptian physician, is married to a Scottish practicing doctor. In spite of the fact that her husband is a Muslim convert, Salma feels alienated in Scotland. Since she does not have British citizenship, deportation poses the threat of detaching her from her family. After hearing a politician on TV speaking about the necessity of deporting anyone who was not born in the country, Salma’s youngest child points out that she is the only family member to be out (Aboulela 2019: 23). She pays an “effort to belong” but remains aware that “she was not British enough” (Aboulela 2019: 41-42). Salma keeps “digging deeper all the time, craving connections, self-conscious that her roots, despite the children, might not be strong enough” (Aboulela 2019: 41). To overcome such feelings, she starts contacting Amir, her old Egyptian colleague from university and former fiancé, on social media. Contacting Amir reflects her homesickness and nostalgia for the past; a past during which she used to enjoy more authority over her life in her homeland.

Moni’s identity problems emanate from different social problems which impede her full and successful integration in the British society. Moni refuses to join her husband who works in Saudi Arabia because she believes that her residence in an advanced Western country provides her handicapped son with the proper medical care he needs; her decision serves her son but shatters her relationship with her husband. Her excessive motherly affection towards her disabled child cripples her since she totally dedicates her time for him; “weight gain and no time to cut her toe-nails, to moisturize her elbows or buy a deodorant when it ran out. Sleep became a treat” (Aboulela 2019: 18). Before his birth, Moni used to be active and smiling

with a bank job, independence, and a postgraduate degree. Giving birth to an impaired child subordinates her selfhood and results in losing her self-esteem; she “no longer considered herself attractive or even thought of herself as feminine” (Aboulela 2019: 47). This mother-child attachment renders Moni’s other social relations dysfunctional and it disconnects her from her family in Sudan as well as her current community in Britain. The guilt she feels when she departs from her son, Adam, attests to the fact that her son’s disability deformed her social relations.

Escaping the war zone in her homeland, Syria, Iman flees to Europe with her family. Iman’s problem as an Arab Muslim immigrant in Britain stems from her lack of qualifications and her financial dependency which greatly impede the normal development of her subjectivity as an independent adult; “[w]henver, she turned, there would be someone to guide her, adopt and sponsor her” (Aboulela 2019: 13). Going through three failed, childless marriages to possessive husbands adds “[a]nother trauma ... to the civil war she had experienced” (Aboulela 2019: 68). Her sudden divorce from her third husband, Ibrahim, forces her to confront this reality and entices her to rediscover herself and to reconstruct her subjectivity independently.

According to Campbell, this call or summoning threatens to disrupt the hero’s life and the hero might show a “Refusal of the Call.” The novel begins with the fact that the journey is met with refusal from all women from the Arabic speaking Muslim Women’s group, claiming that “the grave had been defaced” (Aboulela 2019: 1) and “the plaque bearing Qur’anic verse of light crossed out” (Aboulela 2019: 2) which indicates that Muslims in Scotland are subject to aversion even if they have Scottish origins. Moreover, the fact that Moni and Iman undertake the journey grudgingly without considering the need to fulfill its goals represents their “Refusal of the Call.” Moni’s refusal is due to “Adam’s condition,” having a “severe cerebral palsy” (Aboulela 2019: 3). Nevertheless, Moni finally accepts in order “to express solidarity with her friend” whereas Iman agrees out of devotion to her friend, Salma (Aboulela 2019: 3).

Once the trio travelers respond to the call, they receive “Supernatural Aid” from the Hoopoe bird which stands for spiritual guidance and protection, particularly to Iman. The Hoopoe has a didactic role in the story and functions as a “spiritual teacher” since he “imparts ancient wisdom and guidance” (Aboulela 2019: 287). Therefore, the Hoopoe mentors Iman’s transformation and inspires her to achieve self-autonomy. Later in the story, he guides Moni, Salma and Iman out of the forest and then takes them back in time to witness the building of the monastery.

Campbell asserts that upon responding to this call, the hero moves from the normal world into a world of the unknown that is characterized by darkness and danger. A typical example of this is moving from the city into the forest: “Salma, Moni and Iman –travelling companions. Escaping the stuck-together building of the city” (Aboulela 2019: 4). The “Crossing of the First Threshold” is manifested in leaving the car and crossing to the other side by ferry. This stage marks the beginning of their adventure as they leave the realm of the known, venturing into the unknown or what Campbell calls the “Belly of the Whale.”

### 3.2.2 Initiation

The second stage of the journey is “Initiation.” In the forest, the three protagonists go through a “Road of Trials,” and they overcome several challenges and obstacles which lead to their transformation. In this stage, the journey starts to become more laborious and it takes surreal turns different from its realistic outset. The surreal aspect functions as an adequate projection of the characters’ spiritual quest which cannot be represented by everyday happenings. The three protagonists come across a “Spiritual Labyrinth” which is populated by “Symbolic Figures.” In fact, each one of them has a “Symbolic Figure” which reflects her dilemma: Salma’s ghost-like man with the red T-shirt who resembles her former Egyptian fiancé, Moni’s speechless young boy who stands for her sickly attachment to her son, Adam, and Iman’s Hoopoe bird which indicates her need for mentoring. These figures show the core of each character’s problem and function as a catalyzing force which instigates the necessary transformation to overcome it.

The initiation process exposes the characters to different experiences which perform important stages in their journey towards self discovery and self assertion. In “The Woman as Temptress” stage of the hero’s initiation, physical pleasures distract the hero from pursuing his/her quest. Salma goes through this stage when she yearns to abandon the journey and Britain altogether in order to join her former fiancé in Egypt. Her pressing need for reconnecting with her past and the nostalgia she feels for her oriental roots tempt her to go back to her homeland. In Egypt, Salma believes that she can enjoy the recognition of and the appreciation for her medical degree which she cannot use in Britain; moreover, going back to Egypt will atone for her long-felt sense of displacement and detachment.

On the other hand, the “Atonement with the Father” stage involves the hero’s abandonment of the mother figure and the confrontation with the father figure which stands for the ultimate power in the hero’s life. Moni goes through this stage when she refuses to abide by the Sudanese social norms and defies her husband’s male dominance in order to protect her disabled son. Despite the opposition of her husband and her family in Sudan, Moni’s decision to stay in Britain frees her from the subordination of her will to others and initiates her transformation.

Aboulela’s apt employment of the tropes of magical realism has the double merit of replicating the profound identity crises of her characters and of underscoring the significance of the transformation they undergo in their quest for self reconstruction. According to Campbell’s (2004b: 83) stage of the “Belly of the Whale”, the hero “is swallowed into the unknown and would appear to have died.” In the novel, Aboulela realizes this stage in the metaphorical swallowing the characters experience when they delve into the mystery of the forest; the narrator comments that “the darkness of the forest was womb-like and welcoming” (Aboulela 2019: 226). The characters undergo metamorphoses; Moni turns into a Swiss ball, Iman becomes an animal, and Salma turns flat as a doormat. This signifies the figurative death of their deformed selfhood and indicates their readiness for rebirth. When Iman falls before her transformation, she notices that the ground is “hard as ever but still capable of becoming concave, hollowed, as if

it were a belly sucked in” (Aboulela 2019: 144-5). Upon her rebirth experience, Iman cries like a little child calling for her mother: “‘Mummy, mummy,’ she wailed. I want my mummy” (Aboulela 2019: 146). Going through the same experience for a second time makes Iman feel that “the earth sucking her in and this time she would not be afraid. She would not resist” because the earth “was not a grave” (Aboulela 2019: 228-230). Iman’s awareness of and surrender to her rebirth renders the transformation a willful and a conscious act of growth.

Recovering from their magical transformations and assuming their human shapes mark the three protagonists’ fulfillment of most of the physical and the spiritual stages of Campbell’s Monomyth. When they finally reach the site of Lady Evelyn Cobbold’s grave, the trio travelers know that their arduous journey has come to its end. Salma’s persistence throughout the journey is rewarded when she receives “The Ultimate Boon” by the grave. Aboulela purposefully delays Salma’s metaphorical death and rebirth to distinguish her from her fellow travelers. She reports to them, “I died .... Then, I felt better for it. It was easy to walk back” (Aboulela 2019: 282).

On the spiritual level, the three protagonists achieve Campbell’s “Apotheosis” since they get over their past fears and traumas and seem to understand themselves and the world around them in a better way. Salma learns to be less possessive and dominant regarding her loved ones and decides not to push “her children to achieve what she couldn’t” (Aboulela 2019: 263). She becomes more tolerant of her personal shortcomings and forgives herself for failing the PLAB exam which qualifies her to become a practicing doctor. She also starts to appreciate her job as a physical therapist, having the “satisfaction that she had eased someone’s pain” (Aboulela 2019: 263). As for Moni, she finally declares “I love life” as “[s]he was beginning to look around her, to see all that was beautiful and fascinating. To step away from herself and her problems. To be more than a mother of a disabled child, more than a full-time career” (Aboulela 2019: 261). Moni is no longer avoiding physical movement as she does not mind walking; she “had come so far, walked for hours, overcoming her early reluctance and weakness” (Aboulela: 276). She is also “more willing to mother another child” (Aboulela 2019: 261-2).

Iman, on her part, overcomes her trauma and achieves independence. She is no longer shy and enjoys her fluency in English because it performs a sign of newly attained sense of autonomy (Aboulela 2019: 261). Despite her homelessness and lack of qualifications, she refuses to move in with Salma as she insists on being independent. Marriage and total dependence on a husband is no longer a choice for her. At the beginning of the journey, the three friends felt that they were “together but not together” (Aboulela 2019: 20). The journey helps them regain “faith in their friendship” and “sisterhood” (Aboulela 2019: 251). Subsequently, they seriously consider Moni’s suggestion of starting a business together, a massage clinic for women.

### 3.2.3 Return

The third and last part of the journey is “Return.” Aboulela’s narrative structure features a number of Campbell’s stages of this part of Monomyth. Iman’s “Refusal to Return” to the city stands for the first stage of “Return.” Iman “did not think she could live in the city anymore” (Aboulela2019: 210). Only at a short distance from the grave, Iman sees a hostel and reads the sign of “help needed.” She thinks of this sign as an opportunity to change her life by staying away from the city and being financially independent. Her refusal to return proves to be a transient desire which she discards in order to join her fellow travelers in “The Magic Flight” towards home. By getting to their car to go back to the city, the three friends “Cross the Return Threshold.” Though the plot’s denouement does not feature the characters’ actions after their change, their intention to “Apply the Boon” is clearly stated; they want to retain the wisdom they gained in their quest and to integrate it into their lives. Their Monomyth functions as a healing process which redeems their past traumas, insecurities, and personal flaws. They emerge from the forest with more power and poise which will enable them to establish more successful relations on the familial and the communal levels.

## 4. Conclusion

Aboulela’s novel, *Bird Summons*, performs an important achievement in her fictional repertoire. In this novel, she manages to add new profiles to the wide panorama of female Muslim characters “whose Islamic beliefs greatly influence their perceptions about their identities and largely regulate their relationships with other characters and the societies in which they live” (Awad 2014:70). In the words of Sadia Abbas (2011, 442), Aboulela’s “novels are not just about religious people, not just in touch with older, religious forms of narrative; they also convert specifically novelistic narrative modes to religious ends. Her most unusual talent is her knack for converting literary strategies of secular provenance to religious purposes.” Aboulela’s novels represent intriguing artistic attempts to turn the philosophy of one of the Sufi thinkers into inspirational fictional works; she quotes Attar “[t]ravel away from home and the difficulties will be a medicine for your ego’s badness, you will return softer and wiser” (2000: 41).

Aboulela’s apt utilization of the mystical and the archetypal journey narrative structures reinforces the novel’s central theme regarding the ability of female Muslims to coexist in foreign environments which accommodate ethnic and religious pluralism. Infusing an Islamic narrative structure with a universal non-Islamic one draws the attention to the author’s endorsement of Islamic humanism and universality; more importantly, it underscores the vital role of reciprocal tolerance between different races and religions. The Muslim characters’ mystical and archetypal journeys contextualize Islam and function as a spiritual rehabilitating process which reconfigures their identities outside the Muslim World. These journeys empower the characters to establish their new cultural identity and qualify them to enjoy a better and a healthier integration in secular communities. Hence, the novel can be safely considered as one of the author’s several rehearsals of “the ‘healing’ power of dialogism in intercultural narratives” (Abu-Shomar

2020:1). In *Bird Summons*, Aboulela intertwines two different journey structures to promote individual and communal growth, religious tolerance, harmony, and intercultural coexistence within the context of Arab-British diaspora. Her text features a deliberate interplay between the mystical and the archetypal, the Islamic and the universal, the realistic and the supernatural, in addition to the verbal and the technical. The artistic homogeneity achieved in the novel provides a fictional formula for the possibility of a parallel homogeneity in intercultural societies which could only be achieved through responding to the summons of spirituality.

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