

## Narrative Representation of Cosmopolitanism: The Case of Leila Aboulela's *Bird Summons*

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### Abstract

In her novel *Bird Summons* (2019), Sudanese-born writer Leila Aboulela (1964 –) engenders a paradigm of transnational connectivity and interdependence. This paper investigates how Aboulela's novel, on the narrative level, represents a cosmopolitan community in which people of different cultures and religions do not merely co-exist, but also interact and interconnect. *Bird Summons* is an artificially linear narrative, linking different cultural contexts, transnational settings, and global thematic reflections. In particular, using multiperspectivity, narrative overlapping, intertextuality, and magical realism, Aboulela introduces a model for rooted and religious cosmopolitanism based on intercultural and interfaith dialogue. The paper examines ways of cosmopolitanising the narrative so that the novel itself might contribute to circulating the spirit of cosmopolitanism by engaging the reader in transnational processes of empathy, solidarity, hospitality, and tolerance. The way to transnational connectedness and openness, however, is not an easy one. The novel highlights some of the underlined conflicts and parochial ideas that may menace this cosmopolitan outlook. As the paper demonstrates, there is a close relationship between the narrative technique of *Bird Summons* and the author's vision of cosmopolitanism.

### Keywords:

Leila Aboulela; *Bird Summons*; rooted cosmopolitanism; narrative representation; multiperspectivity; intertextuality; magical realism

التمثيل السردي للكوزموبوليتانية: رواية استدعاء الطيور ليلي أبو العلا نموذجاً  
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المستخلص

في روايتها استدعاء الطيور (٢٠١٩)، أنتجت الكاتبة السودانية المولدة ليلي أبو العلا (١٩٦٤ -) نموذجاً للترابط العابر للحدود الوطنية. تبحث هذه الدراسة في كيفية تمثيل رواية أبو العلا، على المستوى السردى، لمجتمع كوزموبوليتاني لا يتعايش فيه الأشخاص من ثقافات وديانات مختلفة فحسب، بل يتفاعلون ويتواصلون أيضاً. تقدم الرواية نمطاً من السرد الخطي المصطنع، يربط بين سياقات متعددة الثقافات، وأماكن عابرة للحدود الوطنية، وتأملات وموضوعات عالمية. وعلى وجه الخصوص، باستخدام تعدد وجهات النظر وتداخل السرد والتناص والواقعية السحرية، تقدم أبو العلا نموذجاً للكوزموبوليتانية المتجذرة والدينية القائمة على الحوار بين الثقافات والأديان. تبحث الدراسة في طرق إضفاء الطابع العالمي الكوني (الكوزموبوليتاني) على السرد بحيث تسهم الرواية نفسها في تعميم روح الكوزموبوليتانية من خلال إشراك القارئ في العمليات العابرة للحدود الوطنية للتعاطف والتضامن والضيافة والتسامح. ومع ذلك، فإن الطريق إلى الترابط والانفتاح عبر الحدود ليس بالأمر السهل. تسلط الرواية الضوء على بعض الصراعات والأفكار الضيقة التي قد تهدد هذه النظرة العالمية. وكما تبين الدراسة، هناك علاقة وثيقة بين أسلوب السرد في رواية استدعاء الطيور ورؤية المؤلف للكوزموبوليتانية.

الكلمات الدالة:

ليلي أبو العلا - استدعاء الطيور - الكوزموبوليتانية - التمثيل السردى - تعددية المنظور السردى - التناص - الواقعية السحرية

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The novel might now be beginning to adapt and renew itself by imagining the world instead of the nation.

(Schoene 43)

The last few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a growing concern with redefining textuality.

(Kouta 586)

Cosmopolitanism describes a way of life in which people of different cultures, ethnicities, and religions can live together, tolerate their differences, and actively interact. In other words, cosmopolitanism is a transnational way of looking at issues of identity, citizenship, world relationships, cultures, and ethics. Cosmopolitan thinking has widely resonated in different disciplines such as sociology, philosophy, and anthropology. Accordingly, cosmopolitanism is of different versions: cultural, moral, economic, and political. While definitions of cosmopolitanism vary across disciplines, most advocates of cosmopolitan thinking celebrate the values of empathy, solidarity, tolerance, hospitality, and interconnectedness as the foundations of a world community.

The history of cosmopolitanism is characterised by heterogeneity among its proponents. Dated back to ancient Greece, the term 'cosmopolitan' comes from the Greek word 'kosmopolites' which means "citizen of the world" (Patell 4). It was first used by Diogenes the Cynic as early as the fifth century BC, then adopted by the Stoics to express tolerance for people of different nationalities (Cillerabi 1). During the Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant considered cosmopolitanism an alternative to nationalism. In his essays "On the Relationship between Theory and Practice in International Right" (1793) and "Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch" (1795), Kant envisioned a borderless world, a universal community based on hospitality and human rights rather than national and ethnic passions. Martha Craven Nussbaum (1994), on the same vein, called for the establishment of a world citizenship based on moral obligations and human rights rather than nationalism and patriotism. For her, cosmopolitanism is "a set of loyalties to humanity as

a whole” (3). Thus, advocates of cosmopolitanism from Kant to Nussbaum give priority to common humanity and ethical considerations rather than to cultural and national aspects. Recently, however, the issue of whether loyalty to humanity at large entails giving up loyalty to one's own culture has been questioned.

Apart from the universalists, other contemporary voices call for a more balanced form of cosmopolitanism that respects difference and ascertains the value of cultures and local traditions (Spencer 2011; Benhabib 2011; Appiah 2006; Beck 2006; Appiah 2001; Anderson 1998). A human being may change places, but he/she certainly takes with him/her the collective memories he/she has accumulated in these places. Within the postcolonial scholarship, there are voices that aim to resist the global domination of Western cultures at the expense of the cultures of former colonised and less developed nations. For example, Kwame Anthony Appiah calls for 'rooted cosmopolitanism' which maintains balance between the local and the global, allowing the individual to be a citizen of the world while not losing contact with his/her local roots. For Appiah and other rooted cosmopolitans, "connections to family, friends, community and locally shared culture are not only compatible with cosmopolitanism but actually essential for its survival" (Edmunds 14). Unlike Kant and other universalists, Appiah believes that cosmopolitanism is "universalism plus difference" ("Cosmopolitan Reading" 202). Difference, then, is what distinguishes Appiah's version of cosmopolitanism from that of universalists. Individuals can be citizens of the world, maintaining empathy, tolerance, and solidarity with other human beings while keeping their own styles.

Not only can difference be maintained in the cosmopolitan mode of life, but it is also pivotal for its prosperity. Difference here is a positive element that fosters rather than hinders interconnectedness among fellow human beings. For Appiah, cosmopolitanism should be based on "dialogical universalism" which keeps balance between the local and the global through initiating dialogue among different cultures ("Cosmopolitan Reading" 208). Rooted cosmopolitans do not seek to obliterate difference, as universalists attempt to do; rather, they find that difference is an opportunity to initiate a constructive dialogue among different people. Like Appiah, Ulrich Beck (2006) argues that cosmopolitanism is a process that involves interconnecting identities and cultures, a process "in which the universal and the particular, the similar and the dissimilar, the global and the local are to be conceived, not as cultural polarities but as interconnected and reciprocally interpenetrating principles." (72-73)

Since cultural differences enhance cosmopolitan orientations, one wonders whether religions as a major centre of difference among nations and peoples can be part of this cosmopolitan outlook. Religion is one of the cultural dynamics which inevitably bears on the idea of cosmopolitanism in general and rooted cosmopolitanism in particular. For the proponents of rooted cosmopolitanism, world religions like Islam and Christianity are compatible with cosmopolitan thinking (Appiah, 2006; Patell 51; Merry and de Ruyter 55; Turner 192). Recently, the possibility of engineering a sort of ‘religious cosmopolitanism’ has been discussed (Neuman 2011). Several theorists believe that religions are not mere private matters; rather, they have considerable bearings on international politics and intercultural dialogue (Roupakia 645-46; Appiah 2006; Asad 2003; Connolly 1999). Different theoretical and empirical studies have found out that there is a positive relationship between religiosity and cosmopolitan orientations and that Islam and Christianity have always been characterised by their universalistic dimensions that emphasise rather than weaken cosmopolitan values (Driezen et al. 2020; Synnes 2018; Beaman 2016; Iqtidar 2012; Turner 2012). Accordingly, world religions can contribute to establishing new transnational relationships and celebrating diversity provided that the chauvinistic and xenophobic practices of some religious adherents should be given up. Several cosmopolitan thinkers argue that it is the religious practices and dogmatic thinking of some individuals or groups rather than religious beliefs per se that distort the image of religions (Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism* 143; Merry and de Ruyter, 55). In essence, religions are sources of love, fraternity, solidarity, empathy, and tolerance that are vital for the cosmopolitan outlook. Therefore, inter-religious dialogue inevitably reinforces cosmopolitanism. *Bird Summons* advocates this form of rooted cosmopolitanism in which people of different nations and religions can co-exist, empathise, tolerate, co-operate, and interconnect. The question posited by Aboulela’s novel is whether religions as a major centre of difference among nations and cultures can be part of this rooted cosmopolitan perspective in which difference is seen as an opportunity rather than an obstacle.

Being recently published, *Bird Summons* has not yet received critical attention commensurate with its author’s literary position. Apart from “Faith, Identity and Magical Realism in Leila Aboulela’s *Bird Summons*” by Leen Arkhagha and Yousef Awad (2021) and the critical reviews that have already celebrated it, no major study has been based on the text. The present paper analyses *Bird Summons*, drawing critically on the ideas of cosmopolitanism, arguing that the novel is a plea for

initiating dialogue among world cultures and religions. For this purpose, Aboulela employs narrative techniques in a way that allows her to cosmopolitanise the narrative so that the novel itself might contribute to circulating this spirit of cosmopolitanism by engaging the reader in transnational processes of empathy, tolerance, and solidarity.

*Bird Summons* is composed of three interconnected narratives. It tells the story of three Muslim women of different nationalities living in Dundee, Scotland. Salma, an Egyptian massage therapist and the leader of a Muslim Women's Group, is married to David, a Scottish convert to Islam, but she feels that she cannot totally assimilate into the British way of life like her children and husband. She is secretly corresponding online with her Egyptian ex-lover, Amir. Moni, once a successful Sudanese banker, is overstrained by her little son, Adam, who suffers from severe cerebral palsy. She refuses to join her husband in Saudi Arabia where she is afraid her son will not find the same medical care he receives in UK. Iman, a pretty young refugee from Syria, is disappointed by her unsuccessful marriages and the Syrian civil war. The three women embark on a journey to visit the burial place of Lady Evelyn Cobbold (1867-1963), the first British female to go to Mecca for pilgrimage. Later named Zainab, Lady Evelyn was the daughter of the 7th Earl of Dunmore; she was raised in Egypt and North Africa where she came to know about Islam. Her story runs in the background of, and seeps into, the interconnected narratives of the three women. The journey to Lady Evelyn's grave is a religious journey through which the values of cosmopolitanism are emphasised.

The transnational background of Aboulela informs the cosmopolitan setting of *Bird Summons*. The novel was written by a cosmopolitan writer. The daughter of a Sudanese father and an Egyptian mother, Aboulela grew up in Sudan under British-Egyptian rule, sojourned in Doha, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Jakarta, and lived in Scotland where she wrote in English and came to be known as a Scottish writer. In an interview conducted by Claire Chambers in 2009, Aboulela ascertains that her transnational background ignites her interest in "cross-cultural interaction," stating that "the three things that make up my identity, Sudan, Egypt and Britain, were all coming together" (90). Scotland is depicted in the novel as a place welcoming cosmopolitan togetherness and encouraging intermarriage and interfaith relationships. Although the novel is set in contemporary Scotland, and the time span is almost a week, the narration, by means of intertextuality and magical realism, transcends the boundaries of Scotland, navigating across space and time and connecting transnational characters, geographies, and concerns. To



represent this cosmopolitan stance, the narrative is inevitably made polyphonic. In Bakhtinian terms, polyphony “presumes a plurality of fully valid voices within the limits of a single work” (Bakhtin 34). These voices are interdependent and interactive. According to its creator, namely Dostoevsky, the polyphonic novel is characterised by “multi-voicedness” and is composed of elements coming from “several worlds and several autonomous consciousnesses” (16). These polyphonic aspects are traced in *Bird Summons*, making it appropriate for representing Aboulela’s vision of cosmopolitanism. In it, different narrative voices are interweaved together in the form of an omniscient third-person narrator that delves deeply into the characters’ inner thoughts, highlights their differences, and eventually unites them through toleration and mutual understanding.

In almost all her novels and short stories, Aboulela employs polyphonic narration for initiating transnational dialogue within her discussion of rooted cosmopolitanism. *She often demonstrates that rootedness in one’s culture and specific location does not prevent one from forming connections across borders.* In *The Translator* (1999), for instance, Aboulela employs different narrative voices in order to present cross-cultural and interreligious dialogue (Abu-Shomar 54). *Through the dialogic negotiations between the characters of Rae, a Scottish professor, and Sammar, a Sudanese widow, representing the West and Islam, respectively, Aboulela digs deeply for points of convergence that may give grounds for refuting the long-held notion that Islam is the antithesis of Western culture.* Islam here is presented as a unifying element that binds the local and the global. Through the story of Sammar and Rae who fall in love with each other and eventually get married after Rae is converted to Islam, Aboulela propagates rooted cosmopolitanism by insisting on “the importance of left-behind places, of remembered territories that help ground the characters’ sense of self in an alien landscape” (Steiner 23-24). *This tendency to employ dialogism to highlight the interplay of Eastern and Western cultures is also traced in Aboulela’s other narratives. Like The Translator, her novels Minaret (2005) and Lyrics Alley (2010) as well as her short story collections follow the same trajectory of mixing the local and the global worlds to highlight her vision of rooted cosmopolitanism. In these texts, her Muslim characters oscillate between Scotland, Egypt, Sudan, and London, and they can live and interact in a secularised and multicultural world, yet never sever ties with their cultural and religious roots (Steiner 2008; Abbas 2011; Hunter 2013; Abdel Wahab 2014; Englund 2020). Employing mixed marriages, interreligious relations, and the travel motif,*

Aboulela presents what Jessica Homberg-Schramm (2021) calls a post-national world in which she attempts to “transcend an exclusively national positioning by presenting other markers of identity” (52). *Aboulela's are intercultural narratives that seek to dramatize the possibility for Muslims to cope up with the growing spirit of globalization while at the same time continue to belong to their Islamic roots and maintain their Muslimness.*

Like *Aboulela's other literary works, Bird Summons is an intercultural narrative celebrating dialogism.* Aboulela uses the pilgrimage to Lady Evelyn's grave to engineer her model of rooted cosmopolitanism. On their way, the three women stop at Dunnottar Castle, Stonehaven. There, they meet tourists from different countries. Tourist places are perfect spots for establishing intercultural dialogue and enjoying transnational connectivity. Although the visitors of the castle are of different nationalities and languages, Salma feels “a surge of goodwill towards them” (*Bird Summons* 44). In particular, these tourist spots are suitable for interfaith dialogue. The narrator refers to the chapel where Salma is now standing and connects it to wider spatio-temporal and religious connotations:

In 1276, people knelt here and worshipped. They were not her ancestors and she did not share their religion, but she understood them because she herself believed and she herself lived each day knowing she would, after she died, be held to account. It suddenly dawned on her that this chapel perched on the edge of the sea was facing south-east, the direction of Mecca. It was parallel to every purpose-built mosque in the country! (40)

The narrator hints at the shared purpose and direction of Christians and Muslims. Religion here is a dynamic force that is capable of connecting different people. At the same time, Islam is seen as a universal religion that can tolerate difference, an aspect that is also emphasised in *The Translator* (Homberg-Schramm 61). Feeling that all religions are related, Moni also recites from the Quran in this Christian spot, believing that she is “making history” (*Bird Summons* 46). Religion as a unifying element is also introduced in the converted monastery where the three Muslim women are to stay during their visit to the grave. There, they meet transnational people and feel at peace with them. The Monks' Refectory is particularly a source of spirituality for them. The three women feel at home in this place which used to be the residence of Christian monks. Like Salma, Moni is impressed by the refectory: “She suddenly did not want to leave ... Here was peace and plenty, a connection to all that was



good and right. Here was something of a replacement” (154). This openness to difference is a key component of cosmopolitanism.

Aboulela’s text is based on an artificially linear narrative structure with a cosmopolitan orientation. Although the plot of the novel is based on a seven-day-long journey which has a beginning and an end, the apparently chronological order of events is misleading because the text contains many instances of overlapping that make the narrative nonlinear. Events intersect and episodes are divided into small bits of narrative that are scattered in the text so as to promote a form of rooted cosmopolitanism. Although the two episodes in the castle and the monastery discuss the three women’s travelling experience in contemporary Scotland, the narrator recurrently interrupts the flow of events and relates the present moment to similar experiences and collective memories in Egypt, Syria, and Sudan. The objective here is to initiate an intercultural dialogue between Eastern and Western nations. For example, while Salma is wandering around Dunnottar Castle, the narrator suddenly connects this scene to another tourist place in Egypt, Saint Catherine, where Salma organised a similar trip with Amir (*Bird Summons* 42). Like Dunnottar Castle, Saint Catherine is a tourist area where people of different nationalities and religions meet. The narrator then moves to another scene taking place simultaneously and focalised through Iman’s perspective. Iman’s husband meets her at the castle and tells her that he has just divorced her. The narrator relates Iman’s trauma of divorce to her traumatic memories of the Syrian civil war. Even in this “idyllic location” in the Scottish monastery, the civil war “could rise from inside her because she had not left it behind. She had brought it with her on the airplane” (146). The narrator also relates Moni’s current family problems to her unfavorable memories in Sudan. She always remembers how Murtada’s family negatively received her and blamed her for Adam’s illness (15). The three women’s memories connect them to their roots and inform their responses to their life in Scotland. Moving between Scotland, Egypt, Syria, and Sudan and relating the present moment to past memories, the narration contributes to forging new ways of interrelatedness. Thus, seeking to create a cosmopolitan atmosphere, Aboulela emphasises spatio-temporal interconnectivity and interrelatedness at the expense of narrative linearity. This narrative overlapping throughout the text parallels cultural intersection and reflects the fluidity and mobility of contemporary identities. The novel proves that international mobility does not dilute signifiers of culture. Salma yearns for “Foul and tamiyah,” the most popular meal in Egypt, “the

Beloved,” as she calls it, and Iman never forgets the alleys of her village and the Syrian custom of using honey to cure burns. (42, 68)

These forms of interconnection which reinforce Aboulela's rooted cosmopolitan orientation and the universal role of religion are also emphasised through incorporating Lady Evelyn's story in the form of bits of narrative that run in the background of the interconnected narratives of the three women. As it is clear from her autobiography, Lady Evelyn can be called a rooted cosmopolitan since she sojourned many countries, mixed with their people, and was converted to Islam, yet she maintained her Scottish culture. Salma tells the Muslim Women's Group that Lady Evelyn “worshipped as we worshipped, though she kept her own culture, wore Edwardian fashion, shot deer and left instructions for bagpipes to be played at her funeral” (*Bird Summons* 2). Incorporated in the narrative as intertexts, the story of Lady Evelyn also ascertains the universality of Islam and its capacity of overcoming historical conflicts and colonial memories. Although Lady Evelyn belongs to the former colonial power that controlled Africa for a long time, leaving feelings of bitterness and enmity, once she was converted to Islam, she became “our rule model,” as Salma tells the Muslim Women's Group (2). Islam does not only heal the wounds of the past, but it also interconnects those who were once enemies. Aboulela's message here is the same message delivered in her first novel *The Translator*: “Islam can function as a common denominator that transcends national categories and (anti-) imperial struggles.” (Homberg-Schramm 61). In *The Translator*, although Rae belongs to the same imperial culture which produced Lady Evelyn, Sammar falls in love with him and accepts to marry him after he is converted to Islam. Like *The Translator*, Aboulela's latest novel presents “an alternative imagined ‘community of faith’ that unites all Muslims” regardless of their historical and ideological background. (Homberg-Schramm 62)

As part of her cosmopolitan vision, Aboulela blends intertextuality and magical realism, to investigate the intersection and interdependence of different religions and cultures. This method allows her to evoke cultural memories that emphasise the possibility of interreligious dialogue. As soon as the three women arrive at the monastery, they begin to receive spectral visits. The first is from a sacred hoopoe bird that is mentioned in the Quran and known for Muslims as the special messenger of King Solomon. Being acquainted with different cultures, the Hoopoe becomes an important catalyst in engendering cosmopolitanism. Arkhagha and Awad emphasise “the role of Aboulela's hoopoe bird, with its Celtic and Muslim fables, in bridging the past with the present” (118).

The stories of the Hoopoe cosmopolitanise historical and cultural memory and delve deeply into the similarities among cultures and world religions.

One of the stories the Hoopoe tells Iman is that of Nathan who lived long ago in the loch beside the monastery. Nathan was a good charitable Christian at a time when most people were pagan (*Bird Summons* 83). Feeling his self-importance because God accepted his supplications, Nathan committed the sin of arrogance. He even raised his hands to the sky in anger, objecting to God's action when the harvest of his village was destroyed by the sudden rain. Nathan's journey of salvation involves other stories that highlight the importance of the cosmopolitan values of forgiveness, tolerance, hospitality, and empathy. So, the author employs magical realism and intertextuality to create a microcosm of a world where religious cosmopolitanism is possible. The writer uses stories within stories to bring together different historical moments and places, proving that religions have a shared ethical and historical background that can be the basis for building rapport and connectivity among different religions.

The intertexts narrated by the Hoopoe are part of the cosmopolitanising process employed by Aboulela. She attempts to propagate a state of planetary belonging, thus obliterating the sense of estrangement and augmenting the feelings of empathy, solidarity, and belonging within the characters. For example, the stories the Hoopoe delivered to Iman are meant to engage her within a social and historical context that is wider than her immediate context, creating a sort of cosmopolitan conviviality. Unwelcomed by her family back in Syria due to the civil war and divorced by Ibrahim, Iman feels rejected and alienated. The Hoopoe's stories, however, relate Iman to a wider context, namely humanity itself. She is not alone in such suffering; others, as stated in the Hoopoe's tales, have similar problems, and they manage to go beyond them. Turning history into a text within her narrative through a process of intertextuality, Aboulela places her novel within a borderless context, namely the cosmos itself, guaranteeing more engagement on the part of the reader.

The second spectral visitation appears to Salma in the form of a runner whom she thinks is her ex-lover, Amir, coming from Egypt to find her. The author here creates a spatio-temporal affinity by mixing past and present as well as Egypt and Scotland. She evokes the time of the ancient pharaohs, relates it to contemporary Egypt, and mixes it with Salma's reality in Scotland. Attempting to catch up with the runner, Salma reaches a house which seems to be a hub for transcultural exchange where images from Scotland and Ancient Egypt intersect. (*Bird Summons* 237-40). In

one room, she sees paintings of Scottish aristocrats as well as scenes representing Scottish picnics, hunting, and battles. In another room, she sees a coffin of a man from ancient Egypt (239). Salma then time-travels into the recent past in Egypt where she lived, attended college with Amir, and went to visit him at home when he was ill. In the background of the scene, there is a song on the radio by the famous Egyptian singer, Umm Kulthum (240). In the same episode, Salma goes to search for Amir in his clinic. There, he metaphorically dissects her body and takes her muscles, avenging himself upon her for leaving him and marrying David. It is Norma, her Christian mother-in-law, who suddenly appears and rescues her. While Umm Kulthum's song on the radio functions as a signifier of rootedness, the appearance of Norma in the episode can be seen as an indication of transnational as well as religious connectivity. In this way, the local and the global intersect and overlap. Moreover, it is here that "cultural memory is validated and incorporated into the present" (Steiner 8). This method of evoking cultural memory is evident in most of Aboulela's writings. In *The Translator*, for instance, the historical relationship between Scotland and Sudan is summoned in the present moment when Rae and Sammar talk about "Khartoum, where the Blue and the White Niles met under the bridge, under the sun, and across the bridge Umdurman, where saints were buried ... the Mahdi, Gordon, the Khalifa Kitchener and Wingate." (*The Translator* 50). Rae asks Sammar if she has seen the statue of Scottish General Charles George Gordon (1833-1885) in Aberdeen. Gordon, also known as Gordon of Khartoum, served the British empire and was killed in Sudan in 1885.

Focalised through Moni's perspective, the third spectral visitation involves a little boy whom she meets in the monastery. The boy is just an apparition that is an embodiment of how her life entirely focuses on her disabled son. Although Moni's overindulgence with her son, as embodied in the spectral visitation, weighs her down, the episode carries a cosmopolitan message on the significance of empathy, care, and hospitality. According to Alan McCluskey (2015), physical suffering contributes to realising "cosmopolitan priorities" (17). Moni's suffering owing to her son's illness leads her to empathise with the boy in the monastery. The episode also reflects cosmopolitan hospitality. According to Jacques Derrida, cosmopolitan hospitality refers to "a hospitality invented for the singularity of the new arrival, of the unexpected visitor" (83). As soon as Moni sees the child in her backyard, she warmly welcomes him, offers to play with him, takes him out, and bakes cupcakes for him. According to Kristian Shaw (2017), "[o]pening the door to the 'other' evolves into an act of cosmopolitan solidarity,

widening one's capacity for empathetic identification" (71). Moni's sympathy as well as hospitality with the boy signifies a cosmopolitan desire to identify with the other. The unconditional relationship between Moni and the boy is integral with the philosophy of cosmopolitanism. It should be noted that the boy is not given a name. Although he understands Moni and responds to what she says, the boy never speaks, and she does not know his nationality. However, knowing his nationality will not make him more or less human, and this is sufficient to be accepted, assisted, and tolerated with. Accordingly, the novel calls for a cosmopolitan recognition of the common humanity that binds together peoples of the universe regardless of their religious and cultural differences.

The novel not only highlights the promise of cosmopolitanism but also draws attention to the challenges that may undermine it. Engendering a cosmopolitan world in the true sense of the word is not an easy task. Aboulela is conscious of the obstacles that may menace her vision of cosmopolitanism. She is critical of those who are unable to transcend religious and cultural trappings. Murtada, for instance, is religiously and culturally dogmatic. He refuses to stay in UK, thinking that he is just an alien in a foreign country where people are not of his religion. Narrow-minded as he is, he feels at home only in Arabic countries like Saudi Arabia because there "I can wear my jellabiya and saunter to the mosque in my slippers" (*Bird Summons* 25). Like Murtada, Iman's husband is obsessed by rigid ideas. Iman tells her friends that once when a friend of her husband was spending the night at their apartment, her husband ordered her to go to the shower to make sure that there was no trace of her hair in the plughole: "He didn't want his friend seeing a strand of my hair" (74). Here, connectivity is a burden to get rid of rather than an opportunity to clutch to. At the same time, Aboulela hints at the anti-cosmopolitan ideas that may be found in the Scottish society. Watching television, David feels angry to hear a politician stating that "anyone not born in the country should be deported" (23). Such parochial outlook is not suitable for a cosmopolitan way of life.

Furthermore, the three women are weighed down by certain egotistic blemishes that are represented as the antithesis of cosmopolitanism. Salma is drawn to Amir and risks ruining her stable life not because she still loves him, but because he calls her a doctor, awakening her lost dream (*Bird Summons* 263). Because of her son's illness, Moni becomes a hater of life itself; she ignores her husband, leaves her work, and withdraws from all social and communal activities. Moni even negotiates ideas of self-harm; she thinks of killing Murtada,



Adam, and herself (27). Iman is a bit stubborn; she ignores the Hoopoe's advices and follows her own whims. She wants to be free of all social responsibilities: "There is something I want. To be completely alone ... I mean not be accountable to others" (28). These impulses of ant-life, impatience, selfishness, withdrawal, and close-mindedness are not appropriate in a cosmopolitan community. Symbolically, these blemishes crush the three women's human bodies and cause them to lose their humanity. Using magical realism, Aboulela turns the three women into non-human shapes to symbolise their lack of the requirements for interconnectedness. It is only through togetherness and communal activities that they can become human again.

Aboulela takes her characters in a journey of suffering through the allegorical valley of fear where they learn the importance of communion and the negative outcomes of self-centredness. The journey of suffering helps them to reach salvation by digging out their egoistic aspects and rebuilding their human characteristics. Having non-human shapes, the three women are helpless and less mobile, so they need to depend on each other. They learn through suffering that it is only through togetherness and "a shared purpose, a unified effort" that they can find happiness (*Bird Summons* 249). As a result of the Hoopoe's guidance and their collaboration, they are reborn; their human shapes are gradually restored. The journey helps the three women to gain insight and discover their communal selves. (261-63)

To promote her vision of interfaith dialogue within the discussion of cosmopolitanism, Aboulela, at the end of the journey of salvation, skilfully uses magical realism to interweave the two religions of Islam and Christianity. After passing the valley of fear, the three women witness a scene in which workers build a monastery, monks take vows, and a priest reads his prayers. Like *The Translator*, *Bird Summons* here "advocates a transnational religious community" in which religions and cultural practices do not replace one another; rather, they co-exist, intersect, and interconnect (Homberg-Schramm 52). The rebuilding of the monastery may be symbolic of reconstructing religious rapport. Looking through the window of the monastery, Iman discovers that the priest reading the prayers is Nathan, the sinner who was forgiven after his journey of salvation (*Bird Summons* 266-67). In this scene, past and present as well as Muslims and Christians are united together. The three Muslim women listen to Nathan and identify with him because they pass the same journey:

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. The similarity between them was more than the difference. Through the window, the medieval scene was as exotic as a European painting, the rituals alien but acceptable. They had an affinity to it, an understanding that existed despite the barriers of time and race. (267)

Like Nathan, the Muslim women climb the pulpit and recite from the Quran in front of the Christian believers, turning the monastery into an interfaith hub where Islam and Christianity seem complementary rather than contradictory. The three women “were adding to what was already there, supplementing what had already been granted. There was nothing radical in what they were doing, nothing contrary” (268). The Muslim women’s recitation of Quran in the monastery is in harmony with Nathan’s prayers; the literal words may be different, but the message is the same. As it is clear here, the end of the journey is a plea for promoting cosmopolitanism in which people of different religions can enjoy tolerance, love, empathy, and interconnectedness. The novel ascertains that building a constructive interfaith dialogue is possible. As a rooted cosmopolitan, Aboulela negotiates “a Muslim identity within a Western world which is often identified either with a predominantly Christian tradition or with a secularised form of modernity” (Homberg-Schramm 59). This Muslim identity is open to and tolerant toward other cultures and religions. Throughout her literary career, Aboulela has been diligent in promoting this vision of interfaith relationship and carving a positive image of Muslim universal identity. The constructive interreligious dialogue in the monastery is reminiscent of Sammar’s and Rae’s “healing moment reached through dialogic voicing” in *The Translator*. (Abu-Shomar 52)

Through strategies of intertextuality, the novel generates empathy in the reader as a prerequisite for cosmopolitanism. History here is mediated through narratives about different people with similar human experiences despite the difference in religion and culture. History is thus textualized and brought to us as a narrative that engages the reader and, therefore, has energy far beyond the boundaries of the text itself. With its narrative structure, the novel generates within the reader the emotions of empathy and tolerance, turning the reader into a cosmopolitan citizen interconnected with others regardless of ethnicity, nationality, or religion. As Appiah puts it, “we travel in books to learn ‘mutual toleration,’ even the sympathy and concern for others” (“Cosmopolitan Reading” 203). Consequently, *Bird Summons* yields narrative energy that is able to engage the reader in the cosmopolitan mode it engenders. By writing a novel about certain issues that have resonance in history, and by

incorporating similar stories and anecdotes from different historical eras and nations, Aboulela cosmopolitanises her novel, causing it to be a representation of different cultures and religions. Reading a text that initiates a dialogue with cultures, identities, and religions through intertextuality, the reader becomes a part of the process of broadening people's cosmopolitan horizons.

In conclusion, Aboulela employs narrative strategies in a way that enables her to engineer a rooted cosmopolitan paradigm in her novel. Although Aboulela's vision seems to be unattainable, given the fact that the contemporary world is torn by wars and ideological differences, the cosmopolitan message carried out by *Bird Summons* may represent a step forward towards raising awareness of the precariousness of the status quo and the necessity of tolerance, cooperation, and interaction for the survival and progress of humanity. Moreover, *Bird Summons* challenges a totalitarian vision of the world and seeks to recognise and strengthen a shared humanity. Interweaving intertextuality, magical realism, and multiple narrative voices, Aboulela incorporates stories from Eastern and Western cultures as well as from different historical eras so as to ascertain the possibility of interconnectedness and interdependence. The novel is considered a narrative construction of a cosmopolitan vision in which it is not impossible to establish interconnectivity regardless of ethnic, religious, and cultural differences. The narrative structure of the novel allows for the intersection of different cultures and religions as a prerequisite for the attainment of the rooted cosmopolitan paradigm that Aboulela engenders. This cosmopolitan paradigm is not necessarily a utopian one; nevertheless, it celebrates otherness and accepts difference. The novel carries the hope that through empathy, sympathy, openness to difference, solidarity, and hospitality, the gulf between people of different nationalities, cultures, and religions may be bridged.

### **Disclosure statement**

I declare that I have no conflict of interest. This article is an original study, has been written by me, and has not been submitted to any other journal or institution.

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