
Leila Aboulela is a Sudanese-born writer working in Scotland. Her work mostly deals with the issues of cultural clash and of space for migrants. Specifically, *The Kindness of Enemies* deals with the problem of Islamophobia in the West after 9/11 – which persists even after ten years and creates an atmosphere of insecurity for Muslim migrants – and then moves on to give the reader an insight into other problems that migrants have to face in a foreign land. The main dilemma highlighted in the novel is of identity and the need to be comfortable in one’s own skin. Along with this narrative, Aboulela gives us a piece of Islamic history by exploring jihad and Sufism, what they actually mean to Muslims and how people have come to distort their meanings in the present time.

The novel begins with Natasha describing her accidental stay at Malak and Osama’s home. This leads her to witness Osama’s arrest due to a suspicion that arose purely on the basis of his name. Natasha suddenly starts to feel insecure about her alien-ness in the white world, where she will never become a part of the community. As a result, she absorbs herself in her thesis about Shamil Imam, and simultaneously the narrative begins to shift focus to Shamil Imam’s jihad against the Russians. As Shamil Imam’s jihad progresses, so does Natasha’s personal jihad to find an identity in an insecure world.

Through Shamil Imam, the novel unravels the mysteries of jihad and Sufism, as well as the polygamous family unit common in Muslim cultures, and the different ways in which civilisation is defined in different cultures. Through Natasha, Aboulela discusses the dilemma of identity, the need of foregoing one’s indigenous beliefs in the face of societal pressures, and the conflicts caused by judgment on the basis of culture and religion. The novel shows how Natasha loses her freedom of opinion because it may stand in the way of her academic and professional success and, most of all, because it may cause her to be treated as a lesser citizen than native-born Scots. Through Malak, the novel also gives an example of an amalgamation of culture and religion: the balance that is needed for harmony between the physical and the spiritual.

The oscillation between the Natasha-Osman story and Shamil Imam’s story demands an active reading of the novel and encourages the reader to compare Muslim history with the Muslim present. These two stories are not disconnected despite being from completely different time-frames and geographical boundaries. Both of them hold equal importance. However, at one point in the novel, the narrative of the past begins to occupy greater space than the narrative of the present. It remains a question as to who is the protagonist of the novel – whether it is Natasha or Shamil Imam – as the novel begins with Natasha but ends with Shamil Imam.

Through these narratives, Aboulela fights stereotypes regarding Muslims and jihad. Jihad is an integral part of the Muslim faith and it has come to be associated with terrorism. As a result, Islam is generally considered a religion that spreads violence. Through the novel, Aboulela discusses the real meaning of these ideologies and shares instances from history that solidify her ideas. The reader gets to know about the real values of the religion through these characters and becomes able to distinguish between original teachings of Islam and the distorted version that is presented by propagandists. However, this is not done in a manner of a commentary and readers will not feel like they are sitting in a religious sermon. The novel is a series of instances through which readers are free to draw their own conclusions.

The novel is written with great consciousness of amalgamating the present with the past, and the movement between these two narratives increases the need for attentiveness on the part of the reader.
readers as they are left to draw connections between the two narratives. Aboulela deals with a subject that has become a global political issue in a manner that brings attention to its apolitical aspects. In both the narratives, religion is foremost a private issue and becomes politicised only through external intervention. The novel is a literary work that can be read for an exercise of the mind, for insight on culture, and for a light, leisurely read. Aboulela is a writer that every reader of literature should read, as her works give a realistic insight to her characters’ lives. By writing about personal values, Aboulela does not cover the characters’ flaws but discusses them freely. Readers do not encounter a perfect world with amazing characters that come out as heroes; they see a world within which characters must struggle to make their space.

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