

## The Sudanese Writer, Leila Aboulela

*“what matters more than*  
**WHITE or BLACK,**  
**EAST or WEST,**  
*is*  
**FAITH.”**

Helen Fallon

In 1981, while visiting my friend Rosemary, a librarian in Khartoum Polytechnic, I saw the Nile – Africa’s longest river – for the first time. Later, reading the Sudanese writer Leila Aboulela, I was reminded of the vastness and blueness of the Nile in a country where everything else seemed a rose shade of dust and was struck by her words “In the land where the Nile flooded there was no water”.

Leila Aboulela was born in 1964 in Egypt and grew up in Sudan. Her mother, a university lecturer, was one of the strong women that she says were part of her early life. At her primary school she read and loved *Little Women* and *Little House on the Prairie*. A private Catholic secondary school followed and she later completed a degree in economics at the University of Khartoum.

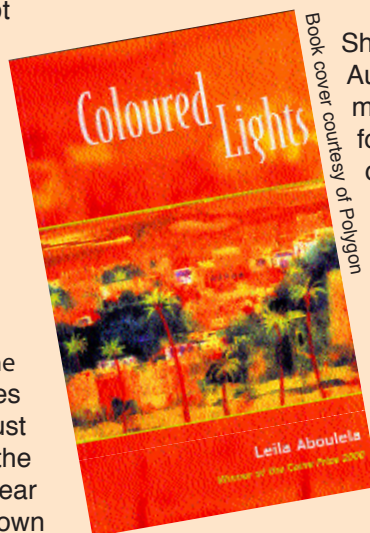
A devout Muslim, in the short story *The Ostrich* she describes how evening classes were broken by the call to prayer: “We must hurry, for it is as if the birds have heard the azan and started to pray before us. I can hear their praises, see the branches bow down low to receive them as they dart to the tree. Feel their urgency, they know how quickly the sun slips away and then it will be too late ... Here in London the birds pray discreetly and I pray alone ... Here in London Majdy does not pray. This country, he says, bit by bit, chips away at your faith.”

### AWAY FROM HOME

Leila left Sudan in 1987 to do further studies at the London School of Economics, where her mother had also studied. She began her life in England, exiled from her husband, Nadir, who is half-English and half-Sudanese. While studying, she looked after their first child. In 1990 they moved to Scotland where her husband works in the oil industry. Leila and Nadir now live in Aberdeen with their three children.

She describes in an interview in *The Times* of August 5, 2000, her decision to write: “I found myself gripped by a peculiar homesickness for the life I’d left behind in Khartoum. But I didn’t know how to express what I felt about my new life – the oddness of it – and so I began, for the first time in my life, to write stories.”

The Gulf War had just begun when they arrived in Scotland. She was caught in an in-between place, a Muslim woman in a country where, at that time, anti-Islamic feeling was quite high and in a culture which was vastly different from that of her home. Many of the stories in *Coloured Lights* are about people who are in this in-between space and illuminate Muslim immigrant experience in Britain. In *The Boy from the Kebab Shop*, a story set in Scotland, Dina, who has no strong religious convictions, has a Scottish Christian father and a Muslim Egyptian mother. She sees a Muslim





**Leila Aboulela grew up in Sudan and moved to Britain in her twenties. In 2000 she won the Caine Prize for African Writing.**

(photo: Caine prize for African Writing)

boy she fancies stretched out on the floor praying and is shocked and alienated by the sight. At home, her mother, Shushu, whose Islamic faith has lapsed, sits and drinks and watches Egyptian films, resenting the Scottish man “who had pursued and enchanted her in the Gezira Club, whisked her off her feet and away from her family. In Scotland, he lost the charisma that Africa bestows on the white man.”

### **NOT SURE OF ANYTHING**

Adapting to life in a new environment is not easy and many of the stories convey a strong sense of loss and sadness. Majdy in *The Ostrich* tells his wife, who has just returned from England, “When I saw you in the airport today, you brought back memories to me. Of people I love and I’ve left behind, of what I once was years ago. I envy you and you find that funny, don’t you, but it’s true. I envy you because you are displaced, yet intact, unchanged, while I question everything and I am not sure of anything anymore.”

Everywhere there are subtle associations often conveying loneliness, displacement and loss – expressed through writing that is full of small intimate details and told in a muted and gentle way. In the story *Coloured Lights* a Sudanese woman, working for the BBC in London, studies the Christmas lights in Regent Street and is consumed by thoughts of her brother who was electrocuted by the worn-out lights he was trying to put up on his wedding day back home in Khartoum.

Alongside the cultural and racial clashes there are deep spiritual struggles. In her novel *The Translator* the main character, Sameer, is living alone in Aberdeen after the sudden death of her husband. She works at the university, translating documents from Arabic into English. Despite her work, she is extremely isolated. She falls in love with Rae, a Scottish Middle East specialist, who “studied Islam for the politics of the Middle East” and who, much to Sameer’s consternation, is an atheist. For Sameer, faith is central to her life. This delicately constructed novel, which moves briskly giving fleeting glimpses of people’s lives, looks at faith and love against a background of secular Scotland and Muslim Sudan.

### **FOG LIFTING FAITH**

Like Sameer in *The Translator*, faith is central to Leila’s life. In the interview in *The Times* she explained that she does not feel constrained by aspects of her Islamic faith, rather it offers her guidance and a politics for living. Watching her children growing up in Scotland she felt she was losing something: “So I tried to write about my feelings of loss. I came to understand that what matters more than white or black, east or west, is faith. It gives you values, a sense of purpose, rootedness.”

Through her rich and evocative writing, Aboulela opens up to us the world of Muslims, and Muslim women in particular; a world that for many of us has been closed and barely visible.

Collecting the Caine Prize for African Writing for her short story *The Museum*, Aboulela said that understanding Africa and one another is about “fog lifting pictures swinging into focus, missing pieces slotting into place.”

The *Translator* and *Coloured Lights* are published by Polygon. ■

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