

# Cultural-Encounter Conflict and Female Modes of Resistance in Two Selected Works From the Perspective of Theory of World Literature

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**Abstract**—This study draws on world literature to demonstrate how the local becomes global in the world of world literature. It focuses on the cultural-encounter conflict of the female characters in two short stories, which are “The Ostrich” by Arab-British Leila Aboulela from her collection of short stories titled *Elsewhere, Home* (2018) and “Bien Pretty” by Mexican-American Sandra Cisneros from her collection of short stories titled *Woman Hollering Creek: and Other Stories* (1991). The study relates this conflict to the male characters in the two stories and highlights the modes of resistance that the two characters, Samra and Lupe, in the two stories respectively, show to the oppression imposed on them by the male characters. It also illustrates how, driven by the power of their resistance, they both manage to assert themselves in the end, each in her own way.

**Index Terms**—global, local, resistance, world literature

## I. INTRODUCTION

In “What Is a World? World Literature as World –Making Activity,” Cheah (2012) draws on Goethe’s view of world literature as a dynamic process of literary exchange and intercourse that takes place among literary works written in different languages (Cheah, 2012, p. 27). Goethe highlights the role which people who receive these exchanged works play in giving value to the works themselves. In his words,

there is being formed [*bilde*] a universal world literature, in which an honorable role is preserved for us Germans. All the nations review our work; they praise, censure, accept, and reject, imitate and distort us, understand or misunderstand us, open or close their hearts to us. All this we must accept with equanimity, since this attitude, taken as a whole, is of great value [*Werth*] to us. (Goethe, qtd in Cheah, 2012, p. 27)

According to Goethe, world literature allows the different nations of the world to read and understand each other through ignoring the different boundaries that separate them from each other and creating a new space where cultures can easily reach and open their hearts for each other. Interestingly enough, Marxists Marx and Engels (2010) refer to world literature in their view of the reconstruction of the dynamics of consumption and production in the world. Like Goethe, they view world literature as an arena where there is universal interdependence and where the national issues turn out to be universal ones through the continuous intercourse of cultures. According to them, the dynamics of consumption and production in the world should be reconfigured in a cosmopolitan way by disrupting the national constructs. Hence, they emphasize the need for “intercourse in every direction” to take the place of “the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency” as they explain that,

in place of the old wants, satisfied by the production of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes. In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal inter-dependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature. (Marx & Engels, 2010, p. 488)

The strategy that is followed by world literature writers is described by Damrosch (2017) in *How to Read World Literature* as “glocal” (Damrosch, 2017, p. 109). According to Damrosch, the term was widely used in the early 1990s by non-governmental groups that aimed to “think globally, act locally” (Damrosch, 2017, p. 109). In the field of literature, according to Damrosch, glocalism has two forms, the first of which is when writers treat local matters for global audience and work outward from their particular location, and the second of which is when writers emphasize a movement from the outward world in and present their locality as a microcosm of global exchange (Damrosch, 2017, p. 109). Based on this, according to Damrosch, glocalism allows for the local to become global and for the global to become local, which he explains through illustrating that the feature of “globalization blurs national borders and unsettles moral codes” (Damrosch, 2017, p. 123). As this is the case, Damrosch argues that “reading world literature should stimulate us to get out into the world” (Damrosch, 2017, p. 129) as it opens up the world for us, and by doing so, it turns the unfamiliar and local into familiar and global and vice versa.

It is also worth noting that world literature can be seen as a strategy that is not only adopted by writers, such as in Damrosch's explanation, but also by readers. In *Literature and the Experience of Globalization: Texts without Borders*, Larsen (2017) expresses his view of world literature by connecting it to a form of reading that is used by readers of literary works as he stipulates that "no literature is just world literature, but all literature in all local languages *can become* it by the way we use it and through the interpretations of the world it invites, when we as readers accept the invitation" (Larsen, 2017, p. 22, italics in original). According to Larsen, what makes a particular literary text belong to world literature is the reader's way of reading and understanding literature. Larsen also sheds light on how world literature leads to the erasure of linguistic boundaries between countries and explains that although the shifting of border markers of the languages in which texts are written is done by all texts, "some texts do it better than others" (Larsen, 2017, p. 22). Larsen further comments on the term *glocal*, which is also used by Damrosch, by illustrating that "it casts a veil over the fact that the relation between the local and the global is a process full of breaks, interruptions, and unsolved conflicts" and that what it calls for is "insight to make a cohesive interconnection between the two of them" (Larsen, 2017, p. 23). In other words, the differences between the local and the global remain there, but with the power of *glocalism*, they become hidden when reading different texts from different cultures all over the world using world literature as a method.

Based on this, this study draws on world literature to reveal how the local becomes global in the world of world literature. It focuses on the cultural-encounter conflict and the female modes of resistance in two short stories, which are "The Ostrich" by Arab-British Leila Aboulela from her collection of short stories titled *Elsewhere, Home* (2018) and "Bien Pretty" by Mexican-American Sandra Cisneros from her collection of short stories titled *Woman Hollering Creek* (1991).

In "The Ostrich," Samra is a Sudanese woman who accompanies her husband, Majdy, to the UK to continue his studies and get his doctoral degree. In the UK, Majdy takes off his Sudanese identity and attempts to entirely imitate the west. He forces Samra to assimilate into the English society in different ways and to hide her true Sudanese origins. Put simply, Samra is not allowed to be herself, which leads to her cultural-encounter conflict. Although she remains married to Majdy, she keeps resisting his continuous efforts to turn her into an English woman, and she finds out that her only possible way to stay in touch with her Sudanese origin is to resort to her imagination and memories in Sudan. In "Bien Pretty," Mexican-American Lupe falls in love with Mexican Flavio, who denies her Mexican origins and keeps accusing her of being American. Lupe's encounter with Flavio leads to her cultural-encounter conflict; he simply represents what she cannot be. She tries to prove herself as a Mexican woman through cooking Mexican food and attaching herself to songs sung by Mexican singers. When Flavio jilts Lupe all of a sudden, she decides to start anew and to love herself more than anyone else. Resembling an Urracus bird, which is one of the famous birds in Mexico, she ends up asserting herself as a Mexican woman away from Flavio.

Although there are some cultural differences between the two stories, the theme they both discuss is a universal one that is not limited nor restricted to a specific place or time, and this blurs the boundaries between the two different cultures in the two stories in the context of world literature. As the study demonstrates this particular point, it exemplifies how the local turns out to be global when using world literature as a form of reading.

## II. DISCUSSION

This section is divided into the following two parts: Cultural-Encounter Conflict and Modes of Resistance.

### A. Cultural-Encounter Conflict

The author of "The Ostrich" is Aboulela (2018), who is an Arab British writer originally from Sudan. In most of her works, she focuses on the Islamic identity formation of her characters. As a result, her fiction is usually described by critics as "Islamic," and she herself is described by Malak (2004) as "an Islamic writer" for her identity implies thoughts and activities that mainly relate to Islam or to its traditions (Malak, 2004, pp. 5-6). Furthermore, in "Fiction in Contest with History? Faith, Resilience and the War on Terror in Aboulela's *The Kindness of Enemies*," Awad (2018) discusses the influence of Islam on Aboulela's female characters as he argues that her fiction "portrays how Islam plays a decisive role in shaping their identities" (Awad, 2018, p. 72). Hence, the link between Islam and the identity of characters in Aboulela's works is intendedly made strong. If they manage to assert themselves in the end of the literary works, this comes as a natural result of their deep faith in God.

The identity crisis which Samra suffers from in the UK is highlighted by Günes (2020) as he explains that in the UK, Samra "experiences a kind of disturbing predicament in her psyche which leads her to feel humiliation and "Otherness"" (Günes, 2020, p. 27). Günes links this feeling of humiliation to Samra's first meeting with her husband, Majdy, at the airport after she has spent two months in Sudan. The first thing that Majdy comments on is the way his wife looks as he remarks that she looks like "something from the third world" (Aboulela, 2018, p. 85). According to Günes, Majdy, who has become "a western white man" (Günes, 2020, p. 28) arises in Samra a feeling that "she is in a place to which she does not belong" (Günes, 2020, p. 29). In other words, the way Samra is dressed tells who she is and where she comes from, for she looks like an other, and this is exactly what Majdy wishes he were able to wipe away from her character.

By considering that Samra has come from the third world, Majdy, proves to be distancing himself from the place she belongs to. His words speak of his complete denial of his Sudanese origins and roots. He has adopted the Western gaze and ended up looking at the people of his own country, including his own wife, as inferior to him. His intention to

assimilate Samra to the Western culture which he now belongs to becomes clear as Samra immediately remembers to “walk next to him and not loiter behind” (Aboulela, 2018, p. 86) recalling that he once told her he did not want the British people to think that she was “an oppressed” (Aboulela, 2018, p. 86) Arab woman. Samra also points out that she now must bear the weight of his arm around her shoulder, a gesture which he imitates to show that Arabs too can be modern (Aboulela, 2018, p. 86). Commenting on Majdy’s acts, in “Between Worlds: Narrating Globalisation, Identity and Alienation in Leila Aboulela’s Short Stories,” Nwiyi and Udoette (2022) stipulate that,

Majdy comes to terms with being different but seeks something greater: integration into the mainstream of this British society. He trades his identity, religious and cultural loyalties and submits to the processes of acculturation where indigenous identity and loyalties are usually tampered with or destroyed. (Nwiyi & Udoette, 2022, p. 9)

Hence, Majdy forsakes his Sudanese, Arab, and Islamic roots for the sake of becoming a western man. Based on this, one can argue that Samra’s first meeting with her husband at the airport stands for her encounter with the Western culture, which is the cause of her current conflict and awareness.

Majdy’s attempts to deny his wife’s origins continue with time. Samra realizes that his marriage to her was not his personal choice. She is aware of the fact that he regrets having rushed into their marriage as she catches him thinking that “he could have married a woman like the ones he admires on TV” (Aboulela, 2018, p. 88). She knows it was his family’s decision to make him marry her; they wanted him to have a Sudanese wife in order to make sure he would come back to Sudan one day. And so for them, her role as a Sudanese wife is “to hold him to his roots” (Aboulela, 2018, p. 88). Yet, Samra is afraid that if she slips into her old life, he would send her the divorce paper and “marry an English woman with yellow hair and blue eyes” (Aboulela, 2018, p. 87).

Majdy keeps trying to force Samra to deny her Sudanese and Islamic origins as if this would help him turn her into the English woman he desires from the inside. He does not accept the current version of his wife; he tells her, referring to his Western friends, “be like them on the inside if you can’t be from the outside” (Aboulela, 2018, p. 94). He also tries to impose on her the way he views western people; he tells her that she should respect the strangers she sees in the street in the UK because they, the strangers, are better than them (Aboulela, 2018, p. 92). Moreover, to save his image as a Westernized Arab, Majdy forces Samra to take off her head cover and her traditional Sudanese tobe in the UK. He is afraid that if she covers her hair in London, people will think that he has forced her to do so and there is no way they will believe that she has chosen to do this by herself (Aboulela, 2018, p. 95). In fact, the way Majdy deals with his wife so as for him to look as modernized as possible represents a form of oppression which he intends to hide from people in the west. He even slaps her after his friends leave their house because she has defended polygamy in Islam in front of them and mentioned that his father had a second wife. In that sense, Majdy, who has become the embodiment of Western culture, causes Samra’s conflict as he simply does not allow her to be herself.

The author of “Bien Pretty” is Cisneros (1991), a Mexican-American writer who, according to Curiel (2003), focuses in her writings on “the discrimination and marginalization of Latino peoples in the United States” (Curiel, 1991, p. 51) and “highlights the migration, poverty, discrimination, and cultural vitality and fluidity that characterizes Chicano culture” (Curiel, 1991, p. 52). In that sense, Cisneros is mainly concerned about providing a space for the disempowered people in society through depicting their suffering. Additionally, one can argue that Cisneros is also concerned about allowing these disempowered people to speak up and to act back to the kind of oppression imposed on them. In “Resistance and Reinvention in Sandra Cisneros’ *Women Hollering Creek*,” Griffin (1997) points out that the works of Cisneros revolve around the empowerment of women as she explains that what Cisneros attempts to do in her stories is to show “how Mexican American women can create new roles for themselves” without wholly rejecting Mexican culture (Griffin, 1997, p. 86). Put simply, most of Cisneros’ female characters do not give up to the restrictions imposed on them because of their origins. Despite being rejected by the Mexican society they live in, they prove to be resistant and manage to assert themselves in different ways within the Mexican culture as mentioned by Griffin.

In “Bien Pretty,” Lupe is a Chicana woman who has moved from California to Texas, where she has fallen in love with a Mexican-American “exterminator” (Cisneros, 1991, p. 150) – as he calls himself- whose name is Flavio. Lupe wishes to use Flavio as a model in her next art piece, where he would be the prince in her representation of the Aztec myth. She is intrigued by the stories he tells her and fascinated by whatever he does or says and by the way he speaks:

“What’s your favorite course?”

“Art History.”

“Nono nono nono nono NO,” he said the way they do in Mexico. (Cisneros, 1991, p. 145)

Yet, Flavio totally denies Lupe’s Mexican origins. When she describes the time they’re living in as “powerful” and quotes the *I Ching* by saying that “returning to one’s roots is returning to one’s destiny” (Cisneros, 1991, p. 149), Flavio recognizes that Lupe is referring to her Mexican origins. He immediately expresses his rejection of what she says by distancing her in his own way, “You Americans have a strange way of thinking about time” (Cisneros, 1991, p. 149). At that moment, Lupe figures out that she has been “lumped with the Northern half of America” (Cisneros, 1991, pp. 149-150), which Flavio continues associating her with by saying, “American time is running alongside the calendar of the sun, even if your world doesn’t know it” (Cisneros, 1991, p. 150). He intends to tell her in his own way that she is not Mexican by any means while he gives himself the right to be proud of his Mexican origins. When she accuses him of being “a product of American imperialism” (Cisneros, 1991, p. 151), he harshly indicates to her that unlike him, she does not know

who she is because of her mixed origin as he says, “I *know* who I am” (Cisneros, p. 150, italics in original). Doing so, Flavio makes it clear that he and Lupe belong to two different worlds as he deliberately erases and denies her Mexican roots. Her relationship with him stands for her encounter with the Mexican culture, according to which she is considered an other, which causes her cultural-encounter conflict.

### *B. Modes of Female Resistance*

In “Articulations of Home and Muslim Identity in the Short Stories of Leila Aboulela,” Zanchettin (2013) comments on the writings of Aboulela by arguing that “homesickness pervades her writing, inviting us to consider what constitutes a home and what one will do to return there, even if only through scent and sound” (Zanchettin, 2013, p. 40). This, in a way, is similar to what happens in the case of Samra, who manages to find home in small abstract things without considering to leave her husband and return to Sudan.

Having spent two months only in Sudan, Samra comes back to the UK as a new person. She narrates, “two years in London and when I come back after two months in Khartoum I feel like I am starting all over again. Two months wiped out two years, and I am a stranger once again (Aboulela, 2018, p. 89). In fact, Samra proves to have undergone a lot of transformation in her last stay in Sudan; she has come back to the UK much stronger and more mature. She plans to resist Majdy’s attempts to assimilate her by acting back and taking him back to his origins. She seeks to bring his Sudanese identity which he has voluntarily forsaken back to life. Although she does not have the intention to leave Majdy, she does her best to awaken his repressed Sudanese identity instead of allowing him to uproot her. When at the airport in the UK, as Majdy carries her bags, he remarks that they are so heavy (Aboulela, 2018, p. 90). Samra explains the reason they are heavy by telling him that she has got him the grapefruit and the white plaited cheese that he likes from Sudan, and when he complains that she has brought him food from “the land of famine” (Aboulela, 2018, p. 90), she seems to be sure that he was secretly happy because those “were things he secretly missed” (Aboulela, 2018, p. 90) even though he does not wish to admit it from the outside. Thus, Samra not only resists Majdy’s attempts to westernize her but also attempts to revive his hidden belongingness to Sudan. She is aware that she was incapable of doing this when she first married him. Back then, she knew his family wanted him to marry her. She admits that by that time, she was “not strong enough to hold him to his roots” (Aboulela, 2018, p. 90). The fact that she now attempts to rejuvenate Majdy’s Sudanese roots through getting him the food he likes is proof of how strong she has become away from home.

When Samra first enters her room in the UK, she describes herself as a “stranger” (Aboulela, 2018, p. 89). She asks herself, “What am I doing here? A stranger suddenly appearing on the stage with no part to read” (Aboulela, 2018, p. 93). She starts to tidy up the room, and when she leans her back on Majdy’s chair, she starts to unroll her memories. Taking into account that her husband does not allow her to be herself nor to dress the way she wants in the UK, she recalls herself wearing the different Sudanese tobes at the university and praying with her colleagues, and she finds herself thinking passionately of a Sudanese person whom she knew in Sudan and met on the plane on her way back to the UK. Realizing that what she misses most is “the essence of [her] country,” Samra falls back on her memories and imagination to remain in touch with her Sudanese roots and religion. This can be understood in the light of Huda Ahmad Ulayyan and Yousef Awad’s (2016) discussion of how in her works, Aboulela highlights the role of religion and shows how it “helps her protagonists find their identities and determine who they are” (Ulayyan & Awad, 2016, p. 35). Samra does not find herself in the type of dress Majdy wants her to wear. He does not allow her to wear her Islamic hijab and Sudanese tobe in the UK. Yet, to be herself, she finds it a must to resort to her imagination as she clarifies, “so I must walk unclothed, imagining cotton on my hair, lifting my hand to adjust an imaginary tobe” (Aboulela, 2018, p. 95). In other words, although Majdy tries to turn Samra into a particular kind of woman both from the inside and from the outside by exterminating her from Sudan and rejecting her origins, he fails to entirely cut her from her roots, and he confesses his failure towards the end of the story as he tells her, “I envy you because you are displaced yet intact, unchanged while I question everything and I am not sure of anything anymore” (Aboulela, 2018, p. 102). Samra’s resistance, thus, leads to her imaginative freedom as she is able to assert herself as a Sudanese woman who wears the tobe, covers her head, drinks grapefruit juice, and prays in mosques in her imagination and memories.

In “Bien Pretty”, as Lupe realizes that she is denied her right to call herself Mexican, she constantly tries to prove her Mexican origins to Flavio in different ways. Her resistance to his rejection takes different modes, one of which is through food. At one time, she invites Flavio over for supper and makes Mexican food, “paella with brown rice and tofu and a pitcher of fresh sangaria” (Cisneros, 1991, p. 150), and at another, she goes out with him to a Mexican restaurant called “Taco Haven” (Cisneros, 1991, p. 155) and orders Mexican “breakfast tacos” (Cisneros, 1991, p. 155). Her resistance also takes the form of songs as she orders some songs by Mexican singers, such as “Lola Beltran” and “Lucha Villa” (Cisneros, 1991, p. 155) when she goes out with Flavio. Doing so, Lupe seizes any opportunity to assert her denied Mexican identity to Flavio.

After Flavio leaves Lupe and tells her about his four sons from his two wives, her insistence to confirm her Mexican roots continues. She actually tries to prove it for herself now by doing things that relate to her Mexican origins. She goes to a Mexican voodoo shop and buys a number of things for herself; she chooses “a Yo Puedo Mas Que from the pagan side and a Virgen de Guadalupe from the Christian” (Cisneros, 1991, p. 159). She also burns all of Flavio’s “letters and poems and photos and cards and all the sketches and studies” (Cisneros, 1991, p. 160) that she had done for him. Yet, she only keeps the last poem he gave her before he left, and this poem is written in Spanish, which is the language spoken by

Mexican people. Then she looks for old Mexican movies and *telenovelas* and spends most of her free time after work watching Mexican movies by Mexican actresses, such as Adela Noriega and Daniela Romo.

Lupe insists not only on proving herself as a Mexican woman, but also on being a strong one. Although she continues to identify with Mexican songs and movies, she feels frustrated by the roles of the women in these movies and songs. Thus, a transformation takes place in her character. She wants the women in these Mexican movies and songs “to be women who make things happen, not women who things happen to” (Cisneros, p. 160). She wants these Mexican women who represent her to be strong, to face the world, and to start anew. She wants them to be “real women,” and to be “passionate *and* powerful, tender and volatile. And, above all, fierce” (Cisneros, 1991, p. 161, italics in original). Instead of identifying with Mexican Daniela Romo singing “soy infeliz” (Cisneros, p. 163), which means I am unhappy (my translation), she identifies with “Daniela Romo singing “*Ya no. Es verdad que te adoro, pero mas me adoro yo.*” I love you, honey, but I love me more” (Cisneros, 1991, p. 163). She realizes the importance of self-love and decides to “right the world and live” (Cisneros, 1991, p. 163). She ends up prioritizing herself over her old self that was so in love with Flavio. Interestingly, her taste of songs reflects the change she has been through.

As an artist, Lupe also tries to pass the kind of power she has gained to her artwork. As Griffin (1997) notes, when Lupe returns to her painting to finish it, the “need to rewrite the kinds of stories told about women affects her work,” (Griffin, 1991, p. 94) and she decides to switch the positions of the prince and the princess; instead of having the prince observing the princess, she presents the princess as the one watching the prince, equipping the female character with the power of the gaze and the ability to see things around her instead of staying asleep, and this in particular connotes Lupe’s actual awakening. By the end of the story, Lupe is seen chasing Urracas, which is a bird that is famous in Mexico: “*Urracas* curving, descending on treetops, Wide wings against blue. Branch tips trembling when they land, quivering when they take off again” (Cisneros, 1991, p. 164, italics in original).

In reality, Lupe becomes as free as this bird. Having been insistent during and following her relationship with Flavio, she finally asserts herself not only as a strong Mexican woman, but also as a free Mexican bird. She wishes to have this bird’s wide wings and to start over in her life without Flavio although she realizes that it is not going to be easy for her to do so. She is aware that at times, she will be shaking, and her tips will be as “quivering” and “trembling” as the tips of the Urracus. Yet, at these hard times, she will also be able to take off again, just like the Mexican Urracus itself.

### III. CONCLUSION

Drawing on the theory of world literature, this study reveals how the cultural-encounter conflict is represented in two different texts of two different origins. The oppressed female figure in both texts demonstrates different modes of resistance to defy the cultural oppression and denial of roots in both stories. In “The Ostrich,” Majdy’s attempts to turn Samra into an ostrich that would, out of shame, hide its origin in the ground desperately fail. As she resists his attempts, she proves to be refusing to look at where she comes from as a source of disgrace. She frees herself through envisioning herself dressed the way she wishes and going to mosques in Sudan. Simultaneously, in “Bien Pretty,” Lupe decides to turn into a free Mexican bird called Urracus. This exemplifies her ultimate desire to break away from Flavio, “the exterminator” who does not hide his wish to exterminate her from her Mexican roots. Unlike Samra, who chooses not to leave Majdy, Lupe asserts her Mexican identity by abandoning Flavio and his memories. Hence, the study demonstrates how the world of world literature is a global one that is not constrained by any boundaries. The two female characters go through similar conditions that prevent them from being who they are. Yet, they manage to set themselves free, each in her own way. Furthermore, although each one of these short stories is infused with details that pertain to a specific local background and is intended to represent a particular culture, the theme the two short stories focus on is a universal one, which makes their local worlds global ones.

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