

# Of Hideous ‘Half-and-Halves’: Reading the Grotesque in Lei- la Aboulela’s *The Kindness of Enemies*<sup>1</sup>

Farzaneh Doosti<sup>2</sup>

Amir Ali Nojournian\*<sup>3</sup>

Received: 2019-06-28 | Revised: 2019-08-29 | Accepted: 2019-10-01

## ABSTRACT

Drawing from the mainly Bakhtinian theories of the grotesque and its further readings by Kristeva, Foucault, and Bhabha, the present paper tends to examine the representation of “feminine grotesque” in one of the less discussed novels of Post-millennial Muslim diaspora, Leila Aboulela’s *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015). Written in response to the Islamophobic aftermath of the 9/11 and London bombings, Aboulela’s postmillennial fiction is often read as an instance of Islamic Postcolonialism, in the shade of which the story’s manifestly corpographic quality is mainly neglected by the critics. An offspring of miscegenation between a Muslim African and a white non-Muslim Russian, Aboulela’s female protagonist Natasha Hussein reconfigures diasporic hybridity as seminally “monstrous,” and accordingly proposes a synthesis between the feminine abject and Muslim monstrosity. The Bakhtinian grotesque is exemplarily revitalized in

---

<sup>1</sup> DOI: [10.22051/lghor.2019.26663.1149](https://doi.org/10.22051/lghor.2019.26663.1149)

<sup>2</sup> PhD and lecturer in Department of English, Central Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran; far.doosti.lng@iauctb.ac.ir

<sup>3</sup> Associate Professor of English Department, University of Shahid Beheshti, Tehran (Corresponding author); a-nojournian@sbu.ac.ir

Natasha's abject body at different strata, which turns her body mass from a definite individual figure to a *becoming* political body in a network of sociocultural and religious forces. In her struggle to adjust with space through the Sufi practice of *zikr*, she is both metamorphosed and proposed to the West as an alternative model of embodied Muslim subjectivity which is more willing to tolerate and to negotiate.

**Keywords:** Muslim Diaspora, Corpography, Gyno-Grotesque, Diasporic Body, Muslim Monstrosity, Islamophobia

Alef knows  
That a thread  
Of a story  
Stitches together  
A wound.  
-- Ibtisam Barakat

## Introduction

Unlike American Muslim writers drowned in the political abyss of 'War on Terror,' the ones associated with the British off-shore are supposedly more philosophical in their approach and less affected by Islamophobia. In effect, however, given the influence of religion as a determinative cultural factor, Islam has equally overshadowed their fictional world and human geography. The recently proliferating Muslim texts – including novels, films, and poetry produced by both practicing and non-practicing Muslims from diverse geographical and cultural backgrounds after the turn of fortune in 2001 – have one clear message: the more menace to Muslim diaspora, the more articulate their voices have become.

Shakir Mustafa (2008) observes a drastic change in the tone and attitude of Muslim writers from self-criticism to reactionary response since the 9/11: Whereas the previous generation used the Qur'an for political and social critiques of their own community, contemporary "Muslim writers in the West have been presenting characters who find in the Qur'an a source of positive power and find in their faith a refuge from an environment that has suddenly become less hospitable" (p. 281). As some researchers have observed, this "turn" in the defense of Muslimhood in literature is by far taken for granted in the existing or mainstream diaspora studies, where the unifying denominator of Islam is "often subsumed under" more secular and ideologically neutral categories of race, hybridity, ethnicity, and nationality (Santesso & McClung, 2017, p. xi). Leila Aboulela is one of these writers for whom religiosity is one driving force, so far as she is often called the defender of the faith (Mustafa, 2008). The present research tends to argue that this articulation is not necessarily a positive or happy one: As a result of public stigmatization, the overall tone of Muslim narratives has become bitterer, darker, less hopeful, and more sinister. It is also observed that the very few representations of "Islamic Utopias" in the

works of more advantaged Muslim writers such as Aboulela are insensibly substituted by realistic representation of agony among diasporic Muslims in the West, sometimes intensified by a dystopic vision of the future in their most recent works.

Notwithstanding religious preferences of the writers (believers or otherwise), the corporeal combat of the Muslim migrant woman on daily basis with a host(ile) culture – where ‘veiling’ is taken beyond a free personal choice and socio-political significations are constantly inscribed upon their *othered* bodies – has become an iterative obsession in post-millennial narratives with reactionary strategies towards redefining Muslim identity and reconnecting to the hybrid world around them. One should likewise note that in these narratives, the boundaries of political abstraction and aesthetic self-expression are trespassed towards stronger *poeticity* when it comes to Muslim women’s narratives of embodied Muslimhood. In other words, although Islam plays a key role in their conception, the majority of these narratives refuse to remain at a level of indoctrination or self-defense, and reveal a certain dose of literariness that makes them eligible for deeper study.

Although ‘Diasporic Studies’ is a much favored trend in the academia’s perspective, the majority of studies undertaken have focused on political aspects of the Muslim diasporas, hence ignoring these works’ other literary qualities, such as seminal corpography – i.e. metaphorical representation of the migrant’s embodied subjectivity as a signifying space capable of dialectics with the body of others and the host environment, leading to an oftentimes psychological state of a grotesque self-image as well as stigmatized monstrosity.

To shed more light on the former claim, the present paper investigates the alien(-ated) body of migration in one of the most corpographic novels of post-millennial British Muslim diaspora, namely Aboulela’s *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015). The study begins with an overview of the Bakhtinian notion of grotesque and how it can relate to the diasporic body in the space of Muslim Diaspora, but will also extend this notion into a more inclusively “diasporic condition”. The primordially grotesque conditions forming the human body as a doubled, hybridized space that is constantly *becoming* transformed and re-fragmented are then traced in Aboulela’s female character, Natasha.

### ***Aboulela, Author of Embodied Muslimhood***

The fruit of an intercultural marriage between a Sudanese and an Egyptian, Leila Aboulela is entitled by Wail Hassan (2008) as a true heir of Tayeb Salih<sup>1</sup>, acknowledging her fiction as “part of the growing corpus of Anglophone Arab fiction,” the harbingers of which are mainly “women of a younger generation” with an alternative and challenging vision of postcolonial transnationality, since

---

<sup>1</sup> Father of modern Sudanese fiction. His widely read novel, *Season of Migration to the North* (originally published in Arabic in 1966) is considered a classic Postcolonial Sudanese novel, widely applauded as a counter-narrative to Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, and described by Edward Said as one of the six great novels in Arabic literature (Mahjoub, 2009).

"her work represents two historical developments since the 1970s: the Islamic resurgence that has attempted to fill the void left by the failure of Arab secular ideologies of modernity... and the growth of immigrant Muslim minorities in Europe and the United States" (p. 228). Aboulela's primary concern is to provide a multiple and diverse diorama of Muslim diaspora as a counter-narrative vis-à-vis dominant stereotyping regimes of thought, to celebrate cultural diversity amongst the Muslim *Ummah*. For Aboulela, neither is Muslimhood a pure virtue, nor is cultural hybridity a mere subject of postcolonial interest. As she has explained in an interview about her *Lyrics Alley*, the novel (which is set in an Islamic society) "reflects Muslim cultures in a Muslim setting and I wanted to present characters with different shades of religious devotion. It was also important to show how the traditions that affected women adversely (such as polygamy and segregation) were not tied to religious observance" (Chambers, 2011, p. 103).

Aboulela gained immediate recognition with her debut novel *The Translator* (1999), the story of a young Muslim widow in Scotland and the relationship grown between her and her Scottish employer, a Middle Eastern scholar who, unlike his sympathetic reading of Islam, is reluctant to become a convert. With the happy ending where the Scot scholar takes refuge in the bosom of Sammar – and of Islam – we notice a premature inclination towards Utopianism, an exploration in the genre that she furthered in her early short stories – published in 2001 in *Coloured Lights* – but for many reasons failed to attract critical applause.<sup>1</sup>

Aboulela's Post-millennial novels are distinctly tense, if not pessimistic. Standing out in her oeuvre, *The Kindness of Enemies* could be regarded as a Muslim response to the derogatory connotation of Jihad in the Western eyes by offering an alternative of Sufism and the glorious Jihad as presented in the life story of Imam Shamil. Far from the madding debates over Islamic fundamentalism – and to the interest of this research – the narrative is also replete with corporeal imagery. In *The Kindness of Enemies*, the "defender of the faith" takes the backlash of the 9/11 and the British feud as the subject matter of her novel. Though less is found of the optimism of *The Translator* and *Minaret*, Aboulela seems to respond by portraying what a true Jihadist had been in the past. By juxtaposing the real now and here with her alternative model of the past, she persuades the reader to imagine a more tolerable or negotiable portrait of the non-fundamentalist Muslim.

It is the year 2010 and Natasha Hussein, a half Russian, half Sudanese professor of history is researching the life of Imam Shamil, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Muslim who led the anti-Russian resistance in the Caucasian War. Natasha discovers that her student, Oz, is not only descended from the late warrior, but also pos-

---

<sup>1</sup> Still untouched by the waves of Islamophobia, she broadened her idea of Islamic utopias in the final two stories of her collection *Coloured Lights* (2001). "Days Rotate" and "Radia's Carpet" are allusive attempts in the genre of science fiction or fantasy to envision 22<sup>nd</sup>-century *Muslimvilles* where no geographical borders or machinery are allowed. Nevertheless, I should agree with Chambers (2011) that both stories are "arguably unsuccessful" (p. 132), as plausibility is violated, even castrated, by too much abstraction.

esses Shamil's legendary sword. As Natasha's relationship with Oz and his alluring actress-mother intensifies, Natasha is forced to confront issues about her past that she had long tried to avoid. Abandoned by her Black Sudanese father and living an uneasy life with her Russian mother, Natasha has to encounter her long-neglected identity crisis as Osama Raja (Oz) – her favorite student – is suddenly arrested at his home one morning and charged for having expressed an inclination towards terrorism. The story then breaks in halves, two parallel universes, one set in the post-millennial Islamophobic England where Muslims are monitored everywhere for any trace of tendency towards "Islamic terrorism," and yet where Natasha finds Oz's mother as an apt Muslim guru in life (as a Sufi Muslim, her peaceful approach to life and religion is presented as a possible alternative) – and the other travels back in time and history to the period of Imam Shamil's jihad against the tsar – which also functions to present a factual record of what Jihad really meant to Muslims, reclaiming its past grandeur and status.

Through its oscillation between parallel worlds of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century jihadist Imam Shamil and the present, it deepens our understanding of the Muslim experience in the West as hideous and unwelcome, but capable of dialogue and adjustment. Idris and Zulfiqar (2017) have likewise observed that the fiction of Aboulela "presents Islam as a lifestyle that can easily mix with culture. It does not have to be removed, isolated, and pronounced like a mosque" (p. 37). In *The Kindness of Enemies* Aboulela presents a parade of Muslim struggle to corporeally adjust with the socio-cultural space, and accordingly cope with her initially stigmatized monstrosity, to overcome the grotesque.

## **Conceptual Framework**

### ***The Bakhtinian Grotesque***

In its common use of the term, grotesque is the opposite of the normal, the acceptable, and the visually pleasant, hence implying "the strange, mysterious, magnificent, fantastic, hideous, ugly, incongruous, unpleasant, disgusting," or weird shapes and distorted forms; grotesque also connotes a state of mind that simultaneously invokes "a feeling of uncomfortable bizarreness as well as sympathetic pity" (Bridaham, 1930, p. xiv). John Clark (1991) defines it as "an art that unconscionably mingled and interfused human, animal, vegetable, and mineral in eerie and nightmarish fashion" (p. 18). In critical theory, however, a totally different hold of the concept was proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin (1984b): He remarked that, as a literary trope, the grotesque is a corporeal quality that is open and connected to the lower, the social, and the material strata. Unlike the modern individual body, the diasporic and the grotesque have some common characteristics of being degraded and yet related to the socio-political. Both are *becoming* bodies that are shaped in the interactive processes of creating body politics out of them, which will surpass death and biological termination.

The grotesque body as a literary trope first appeared in Bakhtin's study of French Renaissance writer François Rabelais. While the nineteenth century

scholars offered a totally negative or dismissive view of the grotesque aspect of Rabelais' world, Bakhtin found it worth scrutiny: As a Renaissance writer at the crossroads of cosmopolitanism and humanism, Rabelais applied the "grotesque body" in his novels to relate political conflicts to human anatomy. The grotesque body is open to the universal world, open to biological and social exchange, not in a spiritual transcendence, but at a material, down-to-earth level. Accordingly,

The body and bodily life have here a cosmic and at the same time an all-people's character; this is not the body and its physiology in the modern sense of these words, because it is not individualized. The material bodily principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed. . . . (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 19)

This exaggeration has a positive function for the writer. Bodily life, through images of "fertility, growth, and a brimming-over abundance", proliferates itself as a matter of the public and the social, rather than "the isolated biological individual," or "the private, egotistic" man – the grotesque locates "the collective ancestral body of all the people" (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 19).

More importantly, the biological body becomes the means by which the vertical hierarchies of medieval culture are subverted, and replaced by a new, historic, and potentially scientific conception of human life; that is, the grotesque body is also the site of the carnival. The book on Rabelais is reckoned by a contemporary scholar as the point of reconciliation and synthesis of "culture and life in the acts of human body, reworking and redrawing the boundaries of cultural taboos, and championing a symbiosis between the epic and the novelistic," hence inscribing a "new sense of tradition" onto the "the irreverent life of folk (community) culture" (Tihanov, 2013, p. 5). With the hierarchical order subverted in the practice of carnivalesque, grotesque realism becomes a matter of "degradation" and lowering of all spiritual ideals and abstraction to the material world:

To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organ; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth. Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one. (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 21)

In the grotesque body, the unpleasant, hidden aspects of human anatomy are exaggeratedly shown larger as if under a magnifier: The human face (mouth and nose) and the genitals are given more attention, because these are the desecralized elements of mundane life and the most significant means of its survival and transfiguration. The eyes, he argues, have no part in these comic images, because they express an individual, "self-sufficient human life," which is not essential to the grotesque: "the grotesque face is actually reduced to the

gaping mouth; the other features are only a frame encasing this wide open bodily abyss" (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 226). All these acts are performed on the confines of the body and outer world, or on the confines of the old and new body. In all these events the beginning and end of life are closely linked and interwoven. Just like the carnival itself, the grotesque attempts for the downfall and therefore annihilation of the ideal.

Examining Bakhtin's essay *Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity* written in the 1920s, Galin Tihanov (2013) reveals how the cultural value of the body in Bakhtinian thought is dependent on the boundaries of the individual body, whence keenly linking his idea of the internal and external bodies to a phenomenological perspective:<sup>1</sup>

It is the inner body that is accessible to and controllable by me. But there is also the outward body, which is given to me only in a fragmentary fashion and to which I cannot react in an "unmediated way". The external body is the mode of existence of our bodies that bestows on us the feeling of wholeness; we feel complete and integral only through the life of our external bodies. (pp. 6-7)

Such a perception of the body also entails it to be unfocalized, dynamic, and interactive. The grotesque body is, according to Bakhtin, constantly *becoming*; it is never finalized or completed. It is always creating and recreating itself as well as the body of the other. It swallows the world and turns it into excretions, while it is also swallowed by an all-encompassing world. It becomes fertile, gives birth, and dies, while it could be an embryonic entity within another one's body. It has got limbs to grow and to assault. It could be raped and dismembered (Dentith, 1995, pp. 226-7).

Bakhtin also remarked that the grotesque body is the unique feature of early modern arts. In the modern image of the individual body, sexual life, eating, drinking, and defecation have radically changed their meaning: They have been transferred to the private and psychological level where their connotation becomes narrow and specific, torn away from the direct relation to the life of society and to the cosmic whole. In this new connotation they can no longer carry on their former philosophical functions. The body of the modern canon is merely one body with no signs of duality: "[I]t is self-sufficient and speaks in its name alone. All that happens within it concerns it alone, that is, only the individual, closed sphere. Therefore, all the events taking place within it acquire one single meaning" (Dentith, 1995, p. 230).

On the contrary, the grotesque body is not an individual, biological body; it does not terminate with death. With every death, a new grotesque body is born

---

<sup>1</sup> Namely, Max Scheler's phenomenology. Tihanov has observed that Bakhtin's term *sochuvstvie* is a precise rendition of Scheler's notion of *sympathie*. According to this notion, the biological life of an organism becomes a value only in another's sympathy and compassion with that life. Therefore, Bakhtin concludes, the body is never self-sufficient: It needs the other's recognition and his form-giving activity (Tihanov, 2013, p. 7).

and it keeps becoming something else. In other words, the grotesque body is capable of outgrowing “its own self, transgressing its own body, in which it conceives a new, second body;” this “double body” gives into an “endless chain of bodily life it retains the parts in which one link joins the other” (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 26).

Not only is the body of grotesque realism “hideous and formless”, it is conceptually dialogical. Dialogism is the cause of exaggeration and transformation of those parts of the body which protrude and deride the viewer’s limits of body ideal. Monstrosity of the abnormal body – of the dwarf or figures with missing or additional limbs – is in fact due to their carnivalesque property of turning “the classical rules of proportion and of the general organization of the human body upside down” (Ruck, 2009, p. 11).

Whereas to the consensus of scholars, the body of modernity gradually loses the dialogical, carnivalesque dimension and becomes a merely monological individual– with modern European history witnessing “the fragmentation of that whole attitude” (Dentith, 1995, p. 64) – the postmodern diasporic subject’s body once again becomes a corporeal component of her existence rather than a possession of the self (Ruck, 2009, p. 14).

### ***Abjection as Gyno-Grotesque***

Bakhtin’s notion of the grotesque has one undeniable defect, and that is the negligence of “the social relations of gender in his semiotic model of the body politic” and, therefore, omission of the female grotesque (Russo, 1994, p. 63). While rereading Bakhtin, Julia Kristeva (1982) paid particular attention to the notion of grotesque and its affinity with what she later theorized as the mostly feminine “abject”. According to her, the abject stands for the human reaction (horror, vomit, nausea) to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object or between self and other. Encounter with the corpse that reminds one of her own mortality, the open wound, shit, sewage, even the skin that forms on the surface of warm milk may arise a feeling of abject (Felluga, 2011). For Kristeva, the abject body’s violation of the desire for the “clean and proper” body by way of leaking wastes and fluids removes its boundaries and limitations of selfhood and in effect turns it into the Bakhtinian grotesque once again, this time the physical wasting is the harbinger of an ultimate death. The abject is a result of modern life’s everyday crises. “In her view, human and animal wastes such as feces, urine, vomit, tears, and saliva are repulsive because they test the notion of the self/other split upon which subjectivity depends . . . . The abject body repeatedly violates its own borders, and disrupts the wish for physical self-control and social propriety”: Abjection makes the female subject sick at her own body that is beyond “clean and proper” (Covino, 2004, p. 17). Kristeva (1982) asserted that being neither subject nor object, the abject becomes aware of her disorderly body, its limit, and a promise of death by way of leakage: “Such wastes drop so that I might

live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—cadere, cadaver” (p. 3).

In her book *The Female Grotesque*, Mary Russo (1994) made a distinction between two types of grotesque: the Carnival and the Uncanny. By the end of the nineteenth century, she remarked, a new usage of the term emerges in Arthur Conan Doyle’s Holmes series talking of a *grotesque experience* which is, in that context, an equivalent for the modern psychological notion of the uncanny: “strange, remarkable, tragic, terrible, criminal, grotesque,” whereas in the Bakhtinian notion, “the discursive formation identified with the carnivalesque is understood as historical and locatable, that is, within a certain nexus of space and time, marked by dates, material events, and exteriority” (Russo, 1994, p. 7).

In *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White (1986) argued in favor of the Bakhtinian grotesque in their psychic exploration of the “image of the uncanny, grotesque body” of a woman “as doubled, monstrous, deformed, excessive, and abject”. Accordingly, “the figure of the female hysteric, undergrounded and out of bounds, enacting her pantomime of anguish and rebellion, is as foundational to psychoanalysis as the image of the ‘senile, pregnant hags’ is to the Bakhtinian model of grotesque realism” (Stallybrass & White, p. 25).

Although this has particularly become significant in the writings of women and the larger part of post-20<sup>th</sup>-century gender studies, few studies to date have focused on the abject/grotesque as one of the main features of the migrant body. To keep up with the Bakhtinian notion of the grotesque, the term ‘gynogrotesque’ is applied here to connote the feminine boundaries of strange repulsive self-image.

### ***From Hybridity and Mutation to Diasporic Monstrosity***

Incarnation of complex entities, such as abstraction of deity for the earthbound mankind, is a practice as ancient as human civilization. Not only were Greek and Roman myths fond of ascribing human features to their imagined divinity, the East also had its own version of incarnation. In Buddhism, for instance, Buddhahood is believed to have three embodiments – which are known as *trikaya*. Another long-held corporeal trope in the Western history is the *body politic*: the ploy of a “corporate entity” devised and legalized in order to preserve the monarch – the sovereign head of government – beyond their natural, mortal bodies. An early modern understanding, the frontispiece to Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan* shows “a body composed of multitudinous citizens surmounted by a king’s head” (Olwig, 2002, p. 87), implying the formation of a body politic as a country or state consisting of the natural bodies of all citizens gathered as one. In *The King’s Two Bodies*, first published in 1957, Ernest Kantorowicz (2016) elaborated on an old concept in medieval political theology that the body of the king evolved into two bodies: the *corpus natural* and the

*corpus mysticum*:<sup>1</sup> the social body of the king or emperor existed in proportion with the political power granted to him by divinity – and reinforced via the ISAs. Whereas the king's body natural as a mortal being was subject to death and destruction, the body politic lasted as long as the political power was maintained (pp. 193-9).

Bakhtin was also interested in distinguishing between different bodies of a person in the context of the grotesque. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin (1984a) observed:

It could be said (with certain reservations, of course) that a person of the Middle Ages lived, as it were, two lives: one that was the official life, monolithically serious and gloomy . . . . The other was the life of the carnival square, free and unrestricted, full of ambivalent laughter, blasphemy, the profanation of everything sacred . . . . (pp. 129-30)

The Bakhtinian body is moreover divided into different strata, yet “any official culture that considers itself the only respectable model dismisses all other cultural strata as invalid or harmful” (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. x). The material lower stratum (of body) was most often represented in the narrow sense of the word as rejected and opposed to high, official culture. But in Rabelais, Bakhtin (1984b) argues, a leading role is also played by the gaping mouth: the lower stratum is the open gate leading downward into the bodily underworld (p. 325). The other recurrent grotesque in Rabelais is the portrait of death, where the dead is to fertilize the Mother Earth in an almost erotic unification. With respect to the Bakhtinian model, it is the body natural in its purest form of survival that formatizes the lower stratum of the body, whereas all the higher strata are culturally shaped. Body politic could be extended to the bodies of all human beings, and this inspired Foucault (1998 & 2003) and others (Agamben, 1998; Harvey, 2007) in their formulation of political bodies and biopower. Whereas the “classical body is transcendent and monumental, closed static, self-contained, symmetrical, and sleek, . . . the grotesque body is open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing; it is identified with non-official ‘low’ culture or the carnivalesque, and with social transformation” (Russo, 1994, p. 8).

Anne Norton (2002) has taken the distinction between body natural and body politic into the postcolonial context, arguing that for the colonial subject, to eat simply means to “take in, to become comprehensive, to grow, to enlarge, to increase . . . their own *body politic*” (p. 43). She further argues that Colonialism was an act of penetration and occupation in which the empire entered and occupied the body of the colonized. These acts of penetration were indifferent to the will of the colonized but addressed the libidinal desires of the colonizers.

---

<sup>1</sup> Before Kantorowicz and as early as 1944, a book on the same subject by Henri de Lubac was published in Paris: *Corpus Mysticum: Essai sur L'Eucharistie et l'Église au moyen âge* traces patristic and medieval uses of the Latin phrase *corpus mysticum* (“mystical body”) typically used to refer to the Church as the “mystical body” of Christ.

The colonized body was the open body: "In this semiotic economy. . . the phallus is the sign of power" (Norton, p. 44).

While Norton's approach to the postcolonial body is an amalgamation of Freud, Semiotics, and Postcolonialism, the diasporic space exerts its own network of relations upon the diasporic flesh, leaving it in a grotesque condition. The mouth in the Muslim diasporic body is marked by a constant obsession with what is permitted into the lower stratum and what is not; such an obsession goes beyond that of the Muslim obsession with halal food, and alcohol; in fact, rituals of intake become a matter of power relations.

In the case of women's diasporic experience, one should perhaps consider a double grotesque condition: The migrant woman's body becomes 'abject' – unwanted, abnormal, unaccepted, associated with all undesirable features of the exploited, the othered, the outcast – not only from the point of view of the host culture, but also in the eyes of the home-landers she has deserted to pursue a more individual future. This only worsens and complicates the corporeal condition of the diasporic body, performance ending in a grotesque situation.

Diasporic condition is a primordially grotesque reality, if broadly defined as a general adjective for anything strange, mysterious, magnificent, fantastic, hideous, ugly, incongruous, unpleasant, or disgusting, as well as weird shapes and distorted forms. Nevertheless, "grotesque" may also be applied to invoke both a sense of uncomfortable bizarreness and sympathetic pity. Given the location of the migrant as constantly othered, liminal, and despised by the host culture, it is not unlikely to consider the diasporic subject as an ugly, weird, and distorted anomaly in the mainly homogenous, white texture of the Western culture. Rémi Astruc (2010) has argued that although there is an immense variety of motifs and figures, the three main tropes of the grotesque are "doubleness," "hybridity," and "metamorphosis" (pp. 17-31).

Following Astruc's taxonomy, it is not hard to identify all three forms of the grotesque in the diasporic Muslim body as doubled, hybrid, and transformed. Surprisingly, his taxonomy of the grotesque reveals a peer-to-peer relation with Homi Bhabha's notions of hybridity, ambivalence (a sort of doubleness), subversive mimicry, and mutation – which could be interpreted as a variety of cultural metamorphosis at both physical and mental stages. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha (1994) asserted that liminality as a by-product of cultural hybridity shapes the colonial subject: "[T]he trace of what is disavowed is not repressed but repeated as something *different* – a mutation, a hybrid" (p. 111). The colonial subject is located in a place of hybridity, its identity formed in a space of iteration and translation by the colonizer. Accordingly, both the colonial master and the colonized stay in a cultural space of ambivalence, each of which is somehow contaminated with the other, resulting in a sort of *mutation* or *hybridity* that, Bhabha emphasizes, is achieved "through processes of iteration and translation through which their meanings are very vicariously addressed to – *through* – an Other" (Bhabha, p. 103). Even more significantly, the idea of essentialist hierarchy and ascendancy of powerful cultures could possibly be challenged in such a space of "hybrid gap, which produces no relief, that

the colonial subject *takes place*, its subaltern position inscribed in that space of iteration" (Bhabha, pp. 83-4). Like mimicry, his notion of hybridity is optimistically presented as an opportunity for a sort of subversion. In other words, hybridity for Bhabha is a doubling, dissembling image of being in at least two places at once, which in effect makes the image of the colonizer no longer immediately visible. Although confined to the history of colonialism and cultural imperialism, his theories are widely applied to other similar instances of cultural encounter, such as migration and diaspora, or any other flow of cultures and their interactions.

Muslim migrant literature is replete with moments of bafflement and distortion – i.e. the characters' realizations of their hybrid visage. The crisis intensifies given that not only do the majority of the self-fashioning British hold such a view, but the migrants themselves internalize belief in the bizarre anomaly and ugliness of their looks. This reading is in line with Sophia Rose Arjana's (2015) suggestion that Muslims have always been considered monstrous in the Western imagination, and that September 11 only revitalized and severed such tendencies.

## Discussion

### *The Grotesque in The Kindness of Enemies*

Perhaps we half-and-halves should always make a choice, one nationality instead of the other, one language instead of the other. We should *nourish* one identity and *starve* the other so that it would atrophy and drop off. Then we could relax and become like everyone else, we could snuggle up to the majority and fit in (Aboulela, 2015, p. 104).

The above statement by Natasha Hussein perhaps envelops the gist of what the Bakhtinian notion of the grotesque body implies. Narrated from the first person point of view, the first-level narrative accounts the life of Natasha Hussein, the unhappy offspring of an interracial marriage, whose "grotesque" misfortune starts at the phase of nomenclature: a queer combination of a Russian first name "Natasha" – connoting a stereotypical blonde – that she is not – and "Hussein," which turns out to be an "unfortunate" coincidence, as the Muslim surname reminds everyone, "in London in the summer of 1990", of Saddam Hussein who had just invaded Kuwait (pp. 4-5). For the fourteen-year-old girl who has just arrived in the city, the shame is huge and intolerable.

The somatic consciousness of Natasha Hussein dominates the narrative, turning it into an epitome of what could perhaps be the "self-grotesque": it is revealed during her dream that she has naturalized the grotesque sight of her – surrendering to being different and accepting it, although with pain. Natasha's conceptual perception of herself as a cross-bred child of an interracial marriage is a grotesque figure with two bodies or heads: a *polycephaly* whose existence composed on two languages, two nationalities, and a fusion of two identities that is never fully acknowledged. In order to survive and integrate into the dominant culture, the two-bodied monster, "the half-and-half", should perforce

make an agonizing decision to ‘nourish’ one body and ‘starve’ the other one to death. Some of the migrants manage to totally *drain* their foreign identity – including their religious practices, food, cultural conventions, etc. in order to *drench* themselves in those ones of the host culture, while some others struggle to keep the fire of home conventions burning and resist the cultural demands of the host culture. Nevertheless, this metaphorical mutilation is a laborious procedure which, in case of the mental operation’s success, results in a lesser, abnormal body. The result for Natasha is an asymmetrical two-bodied grotesque: with the ugly, unwanted, malnourished one always dangling from the better, privileged, half, giving it a hideous sight.

What distinguishes Aboulela’s novel from her peers is this somatic consciousness through which the characters become aware of their corporeal vulnerability in the world, and hence attempt to reset, or redefine, their relation to the diasporic space they are forced into. In *The Kindness of Enemies*, the diasporic body is often confused and repelled by her self-image, finding her body a “composite” – a half-human half-animal compound that haunts her dreams in the form of a centaur, a sphinx, or chimera, symbolizing the unpleasant part in the one that never fits in society. In an early dream, Natasha finds herself “split in two, half-human and half-reptile,” and what perplexes her is not her *natural* inhumanity, but the realization that she has “morphed into something completely different” (Aboulela, 2015, p. 76). Self-realization through coping with the sphynx inside and out has not been an easy process for Natasha. Rather it cast her in a constant state of anxiety and panic. As she explains, the symptoms started when as a young girl she hysterically reacted to “a child with the head of a wolf and the body of a seven-year-old-boy” at a fancy-dress party

I knew that the wolf’s head was fake. . . . It was the disproportion of the wolf’s head to the child’s body, the shock of the half-human, half-beast, the lack of fusion between the two. There was no merging. It was a clobbering together, abnormal and clumsy, the head of one species and the body of the other. (p. 40)

Natasha keeps reacting to symbols of hybridity, such as “a picture of a centaur in a library book” that makes her vomit over the pages or “a scene in a horror film of a dog with a man’s head” that makes her faint. Murkily ironic, the older Natasha regards these naïve horror scenes as “the product of an innocent time when aliens from space were more threatening than Muslims from *al-Qaeda*” (p. 40) – the bitter commentary is notably affected by the Islamophobic ambience of the post-millennium. In other words, the terror of facing with the “hybrid” self is rather due to socio-cultural inscriptions on such a body than its metaphorical conceptualization.

As an academic, she is both aware of “the historical roots and taboos against miscegenation” as well as what a Muslim surname would connote to the Islamophobic eye of a Westerner not thoroughly past through the 9/11 trauma. At a deeper stratum of lived experiences, religion has also played a key role in keeping Natasha in a limbo between atheism and faith: In these awkward *composites*

Natasha sees her own liminal self, the two sides of her identity that “were slammed together against their will, that refused to mix”:

I was a *failed hybrid*, made up of unalloyed selves. My Russian mother who regretted marrying my Sudanese father. My African father who came to hate his white wife. My atheist mother who blotted out my Muslim heritage. My Arab father who gave me up to Europe without a fight. (p. 40)

A few lines after contemplation over the causes of her polycephalic condition, she holds on another interrelated conceptual trope of the diasporic body's constantly being in a state of malady, a sort of disease that refuses any cure: Reminding us of Kristeva's notion of abjection, this “revulsion and self-loathing” still slithers through her body in minute doses: “The disease was in me despite the counselling and knowing better. Natasha Hussein would always be with me” (p. 40).

### ***Domestic Grotesque: Dystopian Mothers and Diasporic Daughters***

The dynamics of an Arab family, argues Dalya Abudi (2011) in *Mothers and Daughters in Arab Women's Literature*, as “a site where the self of mother and daughter is shaped” is less openly discussed, mainly because a Muslim's private life is considered an *awra* – an intimate part of the body (p. 3). Accordingly, the cathexis of mother-daughter conflicts has long been taken as a matter of secrecy and never addressed in Arab literature until contemporary female writers started to openly discuss it in their narratives.

Here lies another corporeal trope that tends to conceptualize every human relation or institution in terms of bodily organs – which conceals its imperative based on a subjective interpretation of a Quranic verse, saying *Allah amara bis-sitr*, i.e. “God ordered the concealing of that which is shameful and embarrassing” (Abudi, 2011, pp. 2-3). In other words, by writing of her sexuality or her problematic family relations, or the *awra*, the Muslim female narrator not only rebels against the patriarchal structure of Arab societies, she proves herself blasphemous by acting against the decree of the Holy Book of Islam, and therefore endangering her identity and self-respect. By the very act of writing about taboos and less-discussed aspects of Arab life, the narrator is often left in a psychological cathexis of shame and scandal – which is obviously a grotesque condition.

Natasha's problematic relationship with the mother plays a pivotal role towards a better understanding of her situation: Dissatisfied with her Sudanese husband and a black baby girl in the midst of Africa, Natasha's white mother raises her according to her own secular beliefs, socializing only with another Russian single mother in Khartoum. Young Natasha's diasporic experience begins in her childhood as she senses a major difference between herself and the other girls. Quite aware that “culture and religion are so entwined that sometimes people can't tell the difference,” she craves with a desire to integrate: “[S]ometimes I fasted like them just so as not to be different, but it annoyed my

mother. Those were the years when I had hope of fitting in. Then awkwardness became my home" (Aboulela, 2015, p. 45).

"Patterns of mothering and child-rearing not only influence later adult behaviours," Abudi (2011) remarks, "but are also decisive in producing the kind of 'self' or 'personality' that may be regarded as typical of a given society" (p. 4). Failing to identify her "self" in the figure of a mother who is so dear and supportive that is supposed to be her "home", Natasha develops a problematic relation with her mother that began with a somatic perception. Her mother had trained as a physiotherapist and that is how she came to know her Black husband, who was playing volleyball in his university team when he tore his rotator cuff (Aboulela, 2015, p. 135). But after their marriage, the idea of her physical contact with other men's aching bodies, which is a prerequisite of working as a physiotherapist, made her father to prohibit his wife from working as such: "It would *shame* me, he said, if you touched other men's backs and shoulders and legs. He did not object to cake business," remarks Natasha (p. 136). Ironically however, it was through the cake business that she befriended a better-off white man in Sudan, got her divorce from Natasha's father, and was remarried. Natasha's first sense of alienation occurred in a moment of epiphany, as she noticed as a very young girl the difference between her hair and her mother's: Her mother's straight "yellow shoulder-length hair" mirrors not motherly beauty, but a menace to the daughter's "different" hair whose mother "had no clue how to deal with it. It left her bewildered and helpless, it made her feel incompetent"; and more painfully she identifies her looks with her indifferent father "*even though I was a girl and it should have been like hers*; instead it was a mistake, a bush to touch and in photographs, a cloud" (p. 137).

The whiteness of her mother's "milky white" skin comes as another shock and a source of double shame, first in the act of realizing her envy for her mother's whiteness and her humiliating inferiority – which is revealed to the reader when she confesses to her act of pinching her mother's "inner thigh as hard as I could, until she cried out and dropped the book and scolded me" (p. 138), and secondly in relating it to the reader in a manner of self-confession – and by this, violating the law of silence about *awra* in Muslim Arab societies. If one thing is sure about Natasha is her sense of inferiority and abjection when she compares herself to her ideally white mother, and her failure to model on her life as the closest and most similar person in body and mind – as the majority of mothers are.

Later on we learn that Natasha has had an abortion – a case of pregnancy out of wedlock – but she never mentions how it was carried and who the father was. Besides the scandal of mothering an illegitimate child for a 'Muslim' woman in London, Natasha's obsession with her mother and her recurrent dreams about other white mothers and daughters deriding her "fat black *arse*" (pp. 106-7) suggests that perhaps her fear of incapacity to perform motherly duties or sustaining the flawed chain of miscegenation (perhaps a white man involved?) and raising a child not resembling herself drew her to undergo abortion.

The mother-daughter conflict reaches its climax when her stepfather holds out a white doll for her during an untimed visit to him long after her mother's death, imagining that a daughter naturally inherits her mother's belongings. It is a white doll, "Vintage 1960s," he had purchased on eBay for her instead of the one she had won in the Olympic Games in Rome but got confiscated at the Russian airport. Natasha's immediate reaction is dislike and contempt: "[A] familiar envy. Yes, this was the baby my mother would rather have had, creamy pink with blue eyes, a child with blonde hair that she could comb straight and pat down, not me" (p. 173).

### ***Spacing the Grotesque: A Derelict Demesne Named Natasha***

The novel leads us to another spatial-corporeal trope of *body as real estate* or territory: The diasporic subject not only loses the way back home, but also becomes her own home – yet an insecure one that is constantly subject to invasion and menace. In an early scene in *The Kindness of Enemies*, Natasha gets back to her flat after a tense time in the university and is faced with an instance of housebreaking: "It was as if my door was not my door. It was half-open and inside was chaos. A hole in the roof so that I was staring straight up into the dark attic, foot marks on the carpet. . . . It made me queasy that someone had *fingered* my things, been through my possessions. *It made me feel soiled* (Aboulela, 2015, p. 101, *emphasis added*). This invasion "through a hole" is queerly juxtaposed with remembrance of her abortion – with utensils that enter the womb through an opening – as reminiscent of bodily invasion. Interrogated by the police, she does not feel like she is the owner of that property, rather like "an impostor asking for attention, a troublesome guest taking up space" (pp. 101-2). This in turn reminds her of her late mother and a sense of homelessness after her death: "I missed my mother, she was my first home and now, until the roof was fixed, until the gas and water pipes were checked, I would be homeless" (p. 102).

The above metaphor is perhaps a reiteration of the long-held and world-known structural trope of (feminine) body as battlefield – as real state capable of being possessed, occupied, conquered, or reclaimed.<sup>1</sup> Natasha compares Mother's betrayal to her Sudanese husband to the betrayal of Russia to Africa, hence geographically metaphorizing her parents' relationship. It is revealed later that her mother always felt simultaneously humiliated and sorry for her black child, although for unknown reasons she did not abandon her. Her father was likewise ashamed of the sight of her cross daughter and that was why he gave her over to "foreign man," only to regret it at old age (p. 245). Metaphorically speaking, the girl feels like a territory abandoned by her look-alike Black Muslim father and handed in for custody to a foreign-looking, yet biologically betraying, mother over whom she develops a sense of Electra complex. The complex stiffens in juxtaposition with a political conflict between Chechen Mus-

---

<sup>1</sup> Partially owing its contemporary popularity to Matei Vişniec's controversial play *The Body of a Woman as a Battlefield in the Bosnian War* ("Le femme comme champ de bataille", 1997).

lims – who, by way of religion have more affinity with Natasha – and Russian rulers with historical enmity between them. In the complex process of signification with at least three denominators of sexuality, religion, and culture, Natasha's body becomes a threefold space, her body feminine subsumed to her more significant yet involuntary body politic and body Islamic. It is only after her acquaintance with Malak and acceptance of her as a new mother figure – kind, caring, forgiving, and also a representative of an alternative portrait of the dialogic Muslim – that Natasha can finally overcome her intense sense of abjection, reconcile with her hybrid identity, and move on.

### ***Verbal Grotesque: Muslimhood and Textual Hybridity***

Language is the most controversial manifestation of hybridity. Given that language incorporates into a very important corporeal component, verbal hybridity becomes an investigable issue in the literature of diaspora. Bakhtin (1981) had also remarked that

Hybridisation is a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation, or by some other factor. (p. 358)

Drawing on the dual dynamics of language, Bakhtin (1981) makes a distinction between two types of hybridity: “organic” or unconscious hybridity and “intentional” hybridity. Whereas organic hybridity is defined as an unintentional, unconscious hybridization, and therefore “the most important mode in the historical life and evolution of all languages”, intentional hybridization consists of juxtaposing deliberately different idioms, discourses, and perspectives within the same semiotic space without merging them (Acheraiou, 2011, p. 36). For Bakhtin, the language of the novel is “a system of languages that mutually and ideologically interanimate each other”, an “artistically organized system” in which different languages contact with one another and carve out “a living image of another language” (Acheraiou, pp. 36-37).

Although all languages are hybrid in varying degrees, lending each other linguistic idioms or phrases for a variety of aesthetic, commercial, or scientific reasons, postcolonial theories regard linguistic hybridity as a means of subversion enforced by the introduction of the language of the colonized to that of the colonizer. For Bhabha (1994), as we discussed earlier, hybridization mostly occurs at a linguistic level. According to him, the Third Space is where identity is shaped at an intersection of individuality and community realized through language or education – which would result in a totally unique form of hybridity; Bhabha constantly refers to the specific role of language – i.e. English – as a significant example of how textuality is held in controlling and legitimizing colonial authority as well as ideology.

In their linguistic optimism, Bakhtin and Bhabha regard the dynamic dualism of language as a means of subversion, and so do many Muslim narratives proliferate in multiple uses of Arabic, Urdu, and Bengali diction besides recurrent references to Qur'anic verses and conventional Muslim rituals of greeting and daily speech. In the English narratives of Muslim diaspora, the corporeal, religious, and linguistic hybridity are so well intertwined that it seems not only almost impossible to separate one from another, it also exercises itself as a strategic negotiation of grotesque identity.

It has recently been discussed that these writers' deployment of an English version of their domestic dialects and Muslim verbal rituals is in fact a "foreignizing strategy", "a form of interpellation, a hailing of an Anglophone audience to witness yet not comprehend" the lived experience of Muslimhood (Ayad, 2016, p. 55). The diasporic Muslims' association with their mother tongues also occurs at an unconscious level, erupting only under emotional crises and nervous breakdown. Aboulela's characters regain their African or Eastern accents when they are on the verge of nervous breakdown, not in control of the situation, or undergo emotional crisis. In *The Kindness of Enemies*, after Oz is arrested by security forces as a Jihadi suspect, his room disarrayed and their important properties confiscated, his mother Malak no longer speaks in her usual tone: "Malak was locked in the same spot, her knees bunched up, her face expressionless. When she finally spoke, her voice sounded strange. An accent had crept in. Shock did that to people, it hurtled them back to their mother tongue" (Aboulela, 2015, p. 77). The characters' knowledge of English also betrays them in decisive moments, and the phenomenon reveals the least resemblance to Bhabha's idea of linguistic subversion through mimicry, and at most, it adds up to the grotesque complexion of these figures. Nevertheless, the verbal grotesque occurs at a different level of psycho-textual hybridity in Aboulela's narrative: by way of confession – particularly a disclosure of her problematic relation with her mother, Natasha (along with the author) practice a disclosure of *awra*, which in effect results in another grotesque layer.

### ***Normalizing the Grotesque through Zikr***

As Bakhtin insisted, the grotesque deals with the lower strata, the unpleasant aspects of one's life. It should be however mentioned that unlike their grotesque openings, Muslim women's narratives enjoy a sort of reconciliation through acceptance of their hybrid selves and embrace them. Natasha's individuation (reconciliation with the world and herself) starts with her self-confessional narrative that relentlessly relates all the darker sides of her feelings and deeds; she does not attempt to conceal her mistreatment of Oz as she has actually written a letter to the administrators about Oz's inclination to terror, which leads to his arrest and suffering. There is however a slight shift from grotesque realism to a happy ending when she can find a double for her mother figure in Oz's mother: a kind, loving Sufi guru whose compassion is regardless of gender or beliefs and recalls the ideals of cosmopolitan Islam. And through

her love and guidance during practices of *zikr* with her, Natasha feels a kind of relief from her sense of guilt, humiliation, or contempt (Aboulela, 2015, p. 218).

Natasha of *The Kindness of Enemies* performs cultural assimilation in order to get incorporated into the host space. She does her best to succeed in her academic career by denying her associations with Muslimhood, although her surname “Hussein” ironically betrays her. She is conscious of her alterity and at times turns to manipulative strategies of survival. At certain moments, she has to conceal her passion in the sword of a 19<sup>th</sup>-century Jihadi fighter along with her articles written on the subject; she has to be careful with the kinds of emails she exchanges on the subject.

Natasha’s conscious game of hide and seek with other academicians is revealed to the reader after her student Oz is arrested, and Natasha is interrogated about why she has not mentioned Osama’s name “in the reports we submitted about the students vulnerable to radicalisation” (p. 126). Unlike her other colleagues who resisted the “task of monitoring their Muslim students,” Natasha volunteers for the task – in order to mask her monstrous identity – and attempts to psychologically justify her “spying” other Muslim students, an unethical behavior: “I admitted to myself that I was doing this to distance myself. From Hussein and from the titles of my papers” (p. 127). Natasha’s awareness of her grotesque condition marks her initial dissatisfaction with what she has become: an inherent unhappiness with the unhomely space she is trapped in, and a firm desire for change. Natasha is conscious of the urge in the second generation of grotesque Muslim diasporics to distance themselves from their ‘foreign’ parents and become ‘normalized’ – a struggle which often fails, leading to a crude caricature of paradoxical assimilation.

Many of the young Muslims I taught throughout the years couldn’t wait to bury their dark, badly dressed immigrant parents who never understood what was happening around them or even took an interest, who walked down high streets as if they were still in a village, who obsessed about halal meat and arranged marriages and were so impractical, so arrogant as to imagine that their children would stay loyal. (p. 6)

Natasha’s monstrous self-image could be taken as her first act of subconscious resistance to monstrosity and desire for intersubjective incorporation into the lived space. This metamorphosis, however, takes place phenomenologically after her encounter with Osama’s Sufi mother, Malak.

Malak is an immigrant with Caucasian ancestors who had fled to Western Europe as religious refugees from the harms of the Soviet rule. A prosperous Muslim mother/actress who once regarded the religious freedom Muslims had in the West – “to practice and teach and bring up our children in our own faith” (p. 71) – as enjoyable, Malak turns into as vulnerable a woman overnight as Natasha has always felt after the arrest of Oz. Although humiliated and socially stained, Malak does not radically question the Western ideology and instead of becoming an extremist, she rather pursues the peaceful path her Sufi ancestor

Imam Shamil would have taken: “to reconcile, negotiate and forgive” (p. 62). She resists abjection but imbibes a *body politic* by way of presenting herself as a Muslim mother who struggles to save her innocent child but is also willing to join the War on Terror, whence normalizing her diasporic monstrosity: “So I’m on my own now in this. But I know people in London. I know people in the media and in human rights groups and I am not going to take this lying down” (p. 178). In other words, Malak’s normalizing strategy is an alloy of verbal, ritual, and corporeal negotiations with her “habitat” that, according to Yousef Awad (2018), is meant to “make a political statement by refusing to be tossed out of British social, cultural, demographic, and even geographical spaces. . . . Malak’s travel up and down the country reading The Qur’an may be viewed as a way of cementing her relationship with the country she belongs to and refuses to be detached from” (pp. 85-6). This “political statement” is however not meant for politicians. It is rather the *sine qua non* of corpographic co-presence in spiritual as well as ordinary places “up and down the country” (Awad, 2018, p. 85), where fragments of her diasporic subjectivity can come together through the practice of *zikr*:

Yesterday I prayed further north. In the middle of a suburb which was so artificial and depressing that I almost couldn’t bear to be there. But I stuck it out, telling myself that I would be the first one there ever to say the word “Allah”. . . I don’t want anyone to hear me. The trees, the wind, the angels. That’s enough for me.” (Aboulela, 2015, pp. 312-13)

Awad (2018) has also regarded Malak’s resilience as a faithful revitalization of Sufism “as an ecumenical philosophy that transcends racial and ethnic barriers and boundaries”: Her Sufi meetings to practice modern *zikr* with a miscellany of participants are held in a dance studio in North London (p. 86). Malak is the epitome of a subject in adjustment with space, and her Sufi manners proposed as an alternative for a distortedly violent portrait of Islam represented by ISIS and similar extremists. Malak’s rituals of *zikr* as an empathic attempt to dance with the vibes of monumental British locations, such as castles and seashores, could be interpreted as a personal urge for dialectics with the antagonistic space and overcome a sense of abjection.

In Malak, Natasha finds a mother figure – a kind and caring woman of the same cultural background, whose Sufism (explored in the parallel narrative of Imam Shamil and how he treated his Georgian hostage Anna, and his wives<sup>1</sup>) is the counterpoint of Extremist Muslim movements, and whose corporeality as

---

<sup>1</sup> In fact, Imam Shamil is described by Natasha (2015) as a man of humane qualities who used to treat women and children gently and affectionately. He viewed his hostage, princess Anna of Georgia, with respect and compassion: “She turned and looked at him with the haughtiness of the injured, the stark knowing eyes of a parent who had lost a child. He sensed in her what she had not yet acknowledged; her need to conceive was only dormant, poised to unfurl” (p. 163). Despite a slight doze of voyeurism and suggestions of sexuality here which might contradict overemphasis on his spirituality, Imam Shamil’s admitting of female corporeality as the most natural aspect of her identity without intending to harass her is perhaps an implication of the abysmal distance between Sufism and “Wahabi-Salafi” extremism.

an almost-white woman of Caucasian (quasi-Russian) background is neither intimidating nor subverting Natasha's somatic subjectivity. Natasha's narrative ends with an invitation to a sort of surrender to her godmother, to a ceremony of "ziker on the beach," and to a more cohesive version of herself who begins to feel stitched-together and more "settled" at last:

Sufism delves into the hidden truth behind the disguise. Malak, the teacher disguised as an actor. Natasha the student, acting the part of a teacher. I had come to her today needing to connect, wanting to spend time in her company. Perhaps it was time to acknowledge that what I was after was spiritual. She was ready to be a guide and I would fight my weaknesses in order to follow. (p. 314)

## Conclusion

Aboulela's novels focalize corporeality as the most determinative factor of diasporic Muslim subjectivity. Corpography as a narrative technique in *The Kindness of Enemies* is maintained via centralizing the hybridity of the protagonist's diasporic body and her assimilative attempts that ironically lead to a distorted self-image as uncanny, grotesque, and abject. In other words, the narrative demonstrates how the Bakhtinian notion of the grotesque is revitalized as the most recurrent feature of the diasporic body in Aboulela's novel: Natasha's diasporic body is involuntarily degraded to corporeal interaction with the bodies of others that tend to write on hers and define her subjectivity. In her refusal to remain a merely biological, individual body, Natasha displays the first signs of the grotesque via her differentiation from her Russian, non-Muslim mother, while the society's antagonistic treatment of her, exemplified by a rival academic's dehumanizing threats and verbal abuse, also intensifies the grotesque appearance of a subject obsessed with an intense sense of humiliation.

In conclusion, Aboulela's diasporic body is not a monolithic, homogenous plane. It is rather a manifold space in dialectics with both its public and private strata of signification. 'Body politic,' which has traditionally implied the state and its governing functions, now gets new meanings when examined from the perspective of migration. The migrants' bodies, their movement, and their spatial signification – in contrast to the dominant body (Sign) in the host culture, challenge the body politic of the state and give new meanings to political agency. It is likewise argued that migrant's body is no more a passive object, but becomes an important part of the 'body politic' itself. Natasha's action to join her Sufi guru's ritual of ziker could be seen as Natasha's political agency to both overcome the uncanny grotesque and initiate dialogue with the space. As with the Muslim migrant woman, a third stratum opens up: her body is a semiotic means of validating as well as challenging the 'body *Islamic*' along with her feminine and political strata.

The migrant woman's body is also an abject one: unwanted, abnormal, unaccepted, associated with all undesirable features of the exploited, the othered, the unwanted – not only on the side of host culture, but also in the eyes of the

home-landers she has deserted to pursue a more individual future. This only worsens and complicates the corporeal condition of the diasporic body, ending in a grotesque situation. Multiplicity, as politics of identity-making in these cases, often incorporates the corporeal and religious components, leading in Chimera creatures standing in-between belief and blasphemy. It was also observed that Natasha's self-image often oscillates between the poles of duality – as a hybridized texture of Western and Eastern materials – as well as bearing a double resemblance which often lives a double life of possibilities elsewhere, home.

## References

- Aboulela, L. (2015). *The kindness of enemies*. London, England: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- Abudi, D. (2011). *Mothers and daughters in Arab women's literature: The family frontier*. Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill.
- Acheraiou, A. (2011). *Questioning hybridity, Postcolonialism and Globalization*. London, England: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Agamben, G. (1998). *Homo Sacer: Sovereign power and bare life*. (Heller-Roazen, Trans.) Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Arjana, S. R. (2015). *Muslims in the Western Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Astruc, R. (2010). *Le renouveau du grotesque dans le roman du XXe Siècle: Essai d'anthropologie littéraire*. Paris, France: Classiques Garnier.
- Awad, Y. (2018). Fiction in contest with history? Faith, resilience and the war on terror in Aboulela's *The Kindness of Enemies*. *International Journal of Arab-English Studies*, 18, 71-90.
- Ayad, N. (2016). The politics of foreignizing and domesticating English in Ahdaf Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun*. *Translation Review*, 95(1), 55-66. doi:10.1080/07374836.1182831.
- Bakhtin, M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination: four essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bakhtin, M. (1984a). *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics*. (C. Emerson, Trans.) Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bakhtin, M. (1984b). *Rabelais and his world*. (H. Iswolsky, Trans.) Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Bhabha, H. (1994). *The location of culture*. London, England: Routledge.
- Bridaham, L. B. (1930). *Gargoyles, chimeres and the grotesque in French gothic sculpture*. New York: Architectural Book Publishing.
- Chambers, C. (2011). *British Muslim fictions: Interview with contemporary writers*. London, England: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Clark, J. R. (1991). *The modern satiric grotesque and its traditions*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky.
- Covino, D. (2004). *Amending the abject body: Aesthetic makeovers in medicine and culture*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Dentith, S. (1995). *Bakhtinian thought: An introductory reader*. London, England: Routledge.
- Felluga, D. (2011, June 31). *Modules on Kristeva: On the abject*. Retrieved from <https://cla.purdue.edu/academic/english/theory/psychoanalysis/kristevaabject.html>

- Foucault, M. (1998). *The history of sexuality* (Vol. 1: The will to knowledge). London, England: Pinguin.
- Foucault, M. (2003). *Society must be defended*. (D. Macey, Trans.) New York: Picador.
- Harvey, A. D. (2007). *Body politic: Political metaphor and political violence*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Hassan, W. (2008). Leila Aboulela and the ideology of Muslim immigrant fiction. *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 41(2/3), 298-319.
- Idris, S., & Zulficar, S. (2017). Remapping London: Islam in Aboulela's fiction. *Research Journal of Language and Literature*, 2, 28-42.
- Kantorowicz, E. (2016). *The king's two bodies: An essay on medieval political theology*. New York: Princeton University Press.
- Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of horror: An essay on abjection* (L. S. Roudiez, Trans.) New York: Columbia University Press.
- Mahjoub, J. (2009, February 20). Tayeb Salih. *The Guardian*. Retrieved January 23, 2018, from [www.theguardian.com/books/2009/feb/20/obituary-tayeb-salih](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/feb/20/obituary-tayeb-salih)
- Mustafa, S. (2008). Defending the faith: Islam in post 9/11 anglophone fiction. *Religion & Literature*, 41(2), 281-288. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25676913>
- Norton, A. (2002). *Bloodrites of the post-structuralists: Word, flesh, and revolution*. London, England: Psychology Press.
- Olwig, K. (2002). *Landscape, Nature, and the body politic*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Ruck, N. (2009). Some historical dimensions of the 'dialogical body': From Bakhtin's dialogical grotesque body to the monological body of modernity. *Psychology & Society*, 2(1), 8-17.
- Russo, M. (1994). *The female grotesque: Risk, excess and modernity*. London, England: Routledge.
- Santesso, E. M., & McClung, J. E. (Eds.). (2017). *Islam and postcolonial discourse*. London, England: Routledge.
- Stallybrass, P., & White, A. (1986). *Politics and poetics of transgression*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Tihanov, G. (2013). The gravity of the grotesque: Bakhtin's dislocated humanism. In L. Katkus (Ed.), *Grotesque revisited: grotesque and satire in the post/modern literature of central and Eastern Europe* (pp. 5-17). Newcastle upon Tyne, England: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.