

# Sisterhood in Leila Aboulela's *Bird Summons* and Toni Morrison's *Sula*

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**Abstract**—This study aims to explore how Toni Morrison and Leila Aboulela represent the importance of sisterhood in the lives of women in diaspora, in their novels, *Sula* (1973) and *Bird Summons* (2019). The study attempts to highlight the challenges that women in diaspora face, such as marginalization, patriarchy, and discrimination. Therefore, sisterhood has emerged as a powerful force for empowerment and resistance to colonial contexts. These two novels are analyzed through the lens of Postcolonialism and Feminism. Hence, the researchers rely on the views of Edward Said, Franz Fanon, Gayatri Spivak, and Bell Hook. The study concludes that both Morrison and Aboulela in their novels explore the significant role of sisterhood in the lives of these women in offering solidarity and mutual and collective empowerment in colonial contexts, particularly to those who share common experiences and challenges. The contribution of the study lies in connecting the two novels and investigating how both writers share the same concept of sisterhood.

**Index Terms**—sisterhood, *Sula*, Morrison, *Bird Summons*, Aboulela

## I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of sisterhood has been influential in feminist movements and women's rights advocacy, as it promotes the idea that women can achieve greater life quality and overcome systemic barriers by standing together in solidarity. Additionally, sisterhood can be a source of emotional support, encouragement, and mentorship for women in various aspects of their lives. Overall, sisterhood celebrates the unique bond between women and highlights the importance of building and maintaining positive, supportive relationships among women in personal, social, and professional spheres. Bauder and Juffs (2019) state that sisterhood considers the continuous efforts of women to reach the level of equality they dream of, and their tendency to believe that they are equal in terms of obtaining their rights. The concept of sisterhood in Afro-American literature was built by highlighting it in all kinds of women's literature, and its repetition in literary works, as in the works of Morrison and most of the stories of black women, where writers and critics call for women unity to gain strength and prove their ability to resist oppression.

Parashar (2016) suggests that the Feminist movement did not develop and become in its current form at once. Rather, its history is divided into three stages. The first stage, which started in the late nineteenth century, focused on the rights of women. The second stage began in the early sixties of the twentieth century and at this stage, the scope of the dialogue expanded to include other issues such as the workplace and issues of sexuality and highlighting the struggles that Afro-Americans face due to slavery, racial discrimination, and patriarchy. Sachdev (2020) explains that in Afro-American literature, women's works carry the mission of building sisterhood within the feminist alliance, and their works are important to achieve social justice for black women. Afro-American literature played an important and pivotal role in the history of women's literature and in highlighting the importance of sisterhood among women, where this literature sheds light on the corruption of the traditional image of the silence and subjugation of women, and presents a strong image of the educated and assertive woman (Yousef, 2023, 2024; Abuhasirah & Salameh, 2024).

Toni Morrison's writings focused on women's experiences in black American communities and the importance of sisterhood in their lives (Wagner, 2022). This theme of sisterhood is also reflected in diasporic literature. Smith (2021) states that in diasporic literature, people experience adapting to new countries or new languages, cultures, and societies. The writers of this type of literature focus on highlighting the experiences of women in diaspora, because of the gap they fall into between their traditions and what they need to do to integrate into modern society. In addition to themes of love, loss, and identity, diasporic literature includes stories of immigrant women, the reflection of sisterhood, and the issues they encounter in their homes or the host land. This genre has given birth to icons such as Leila Abuolela, Mohja Kahf, Anita Desai, and others.

Aboulela, a diasporic writer, is an Arab Sudanese, who lives in England. In her works, she focuses on the independence of Arab women, and that their roles are not confined to home only (Omet, 2022). Furthermore, sisterhood emerges as a

form of resistance in the face of postcolonial implications that are imposed on women. Women in diaspora suffer from stereotypical images that were imposed on them according to the Western views of the East. Edward Said in *Orientalism* 1978 discusses the representation of the East through the orientalist discourse, how the West misrepresent the East by labeling them as being barbaric, uneducated, and backward, to justify the Western hegemony and the intervention in the Eastern societies. Therefore, as a result, oriental women are seen as passive, submissive, and sexual objects.

## II. METHOD

The researchers use postcolonialism and feminism to approach the two novels, to discuss the theme of sisterhood. The researchers rely on the views of Said, Fanon, Spivak's, and Hooks. Postcolonialism is the period that comes after the end of colonialism, which cares about exposing the effect of colonialism on people who have undergone colonial experience. Postcolonialism highlights the predicaments that the colonized world went through during Eurocentric colonial hegemony. Many postcolonial writers started to write back to change the stereotypical images that were created by the West during the European colonial aggression (Childs & William, 1997).

Feminism is a literary theory that calls for women's rights, and their continuous attempt to fight oppression, which paved the way for their liberation, feminism as a movement calls for enhancing the life quality for women and engaging them in the political, social, economic fields (Arizah, 2020). In viewing the Subaltern discourse, Spivak highlights the notion of women's ranking in society, and she integrates Postcolonialism with feminism where she connects the issues that women face with their ranking in society, which is determined by men. Spivak examines women's relationship with men as the relation between the colonized and the colonizer, where women are looked down at, and considered as unequal to men. Moreover, they are marginalized and positioned as the "other" (Rose, 2014).

## III. DISCUSSION

### **The Representation of Sisterhood in Morrison's *Sula***

The story of *Sula* is set in the fictional town of Medallion, Ohio. The novel primarily focuses on the lives of two Afro-American women, in a black community Sula and Nel. The Narrative begins in the early 1900s, when slave descendants inhabit a place up on the hill, which they call "The Bottom" an ironic name that represents the condition of the African American people. In the Bottom, Nel Wright and Sula Peace find each other as young girls, and they become close friends. Sula comes from a chaotic household and is seen as somewhat unconventional, while Nel comes from a more traditional and conservative family. Despite their differences, they develop a deep bond and become inseparable. Nel Wright and Sula Peace's personalities are shaped according to their surroundings and the way they are raised in their households. To begin with Nel's relationship with her mother. Nel's mother Helene is a domineering, conservative woman. Helene's mother was a prostitute for it was her occupation. Therefore, Helene's grandmother religiously raised her, in order to avoid following her mother's example (Morrison, 1973).

On the other hand, Helene's husband is always absent, and she finds herself alone in running her household, and raising her child. Therefore, Helene follows her grandmother's footsteps but with more exaggeration. Helene smothers her daughter while raising her, and she succeeds in molding Nel's personality the way she wants, submissive, obedient, and silenced to fit in with the black community ideals, to be, a well-mannered, proper woman, whose only dream, is to find a good husband (Morrison, 1973).

Moreover, Nel's heartless mother does not only want to determine her daughter's fate but also wants to change her physical appearance. Helene is not fond of Nel's "broad flat nose (although Helene expected to improve it somewhat)" (Morrison, 1973. p. 18). Hence, Helene forces Nel to put a clothespin on her nose. "go 'head and pull your nose. It hurts Mamma. Don't you want a nice nose when you grow up?" (Morrison, 1973, p. 55).

In this perspective, living in a patriarchal society in the time of slavery, and after the emancipation proclamation, Afro-American women find themselves in an extremely sensitive position. Pascual (2020) argues that society is divided into three sections, on the top of the social status based on race and sex, are white men, then followed by white women and black men, and finally, at the bottom are black women, and in some cases, they are not categorized. Therefore, black women suffered tremendously for being poorly treated by the white community, and the black male.

In this sense, Spivak (2009) points out that the Subaltern as a concept means; marginalized, inferior people who are suffering under colonization. Spivak as a postcolonial writer does not only speak out for the colonized people in the third world, but she also addresses specifically postcolonial women around the world. Moreover, she encourages them to speak up against injustice and social oppression. In their paper, Ouakouk and Bekkari (2023) argue that "Spivak's work .... she speaks heavily of the injustice and harmful oppression against women in general, and Third World women and non-Europeans in specific. She expressed her desire to deliver and possibly give a voice to the subalterns who cannot speak or are silent" (p. 9). Ouakouk and Bekkari (2023) elaborate further, that Subaltern women are subjected to all sorts of injustice, such as verbal and physical harassment, discrimination, rape, sexism, and violence.

Although *Sula* is set after the emancipation proclamation, Morrison sheds light on the status of Afro-Americans in the aftermath of slavery. Washington (2012) argues that although the slavery period has ended, Afro-Americans should be treated as equal to white people. Helene faces this racist segregation when she is summoned to her grandmother's funeral, her grandmother's house is in the city, Therefore, she goes with little Nel by train, however, mistakenly, she enters the

White cabin and does not notice the marked door for “colored only”. This mistake puts her in an embarrassing situation with the white conductor, who addresses her aggressively and asks her to go back to the colored cabin (Morrison, 1973). Moreover, Helene faces another racist incident, when she and her daughter want to use the bathroom, but since black people are prohibited from using the public facilities with whites. Helene and her daughter squat on the ground hiding between the grass by the train along with the black women and their children, while white people are watching them from the train windows (Morrison, 1973).

Since Afro-American women are at the bottom of the hierarchical pyramid. They are struggling in a racist sexist patriarchal society. They struggle to find a decent job to support their families, after being abandoned by their men who they focus solely on how to maintain their social status. Therefore, they find themselves the only providers in their families. Pascual (2020) also explains the absence of black men from the familial picture by saying that “Most of them are pictured as almost invisible figures within their household, that they either abandon their families or betray their wives and abandon the household” (p. 30). Therefore, Afro-American men do not only protect and support their women from racial aggression, but they encourage the dehumanization of African American women. As Hook (1981) states, “Most black slaves stood quietly as white masters sexually assaulted and brutalized black women and were not compelled to act as protectors” (p. 35). As a result, for black women to support their families, some of them work as concubines. However, this act puts their reputation at risk. Afro-American women are not only seen as inferior, and marginalized, but as the embodiment of female evil and sexual lust. Hooks (1981) states that “Black women were naturally seen as the embodiment of female evil and sexual lust. They were labeled Jezebels” (p. 31).

Nel’s personality is shaped according to her mother and her surroundings. Nel at a young age witnesses remarkable racist incidents; therefore, she knows her current status quo. In addition, her mother’s obsession with forcing little Nel to fit into a stereotypical culture is determined by a patriarchal community. Nel, as a result, becomes submissive, and vulnerable, seeking affection and support.

After the death of her father, Sula leaves with her mother Hanna, to her grandmother’s house Eva. When Eva’s husband Boy abandons her, she has three children to feed. Therefore, she leaves her children with the neighboring family to secure a job, and after eighteen months, she comes again for her children with one leg and money. People in Eva’s community “said Eva stuck it under a train and made them pay off. Another said she sold it to a hospital for 10.000\$” (Morrison, 1973, p. 31). Eva, with this money, builds a big house with many rooms and floors, and she opens it to anyone who needs shelter.

During her stay at her grandmother’s house, Sula is detached and secluded. Her mother is not taking care of her nor giving her love and affection. Hana is always busy making relationships with as many men as she can., Sula always wonders if her mother loves her, however, on one occasion she hears her mother telling her friends, “I love Sula, but I don’t like her” (Morrison, 1973, p. 57). Eva’s house misses law and order and with the absence of parental guidance, Sula becomes hostile, carefree, and rebellious.

Even though Nel and Sula are the opposite of each other in terms of their lifestyles and characters. However, they share the same struggle and discomfort. Therefore, when they met, they knew they completed each other, and with their bond, they supported and took care of each other (Morrison, 1973). Therefore, through their bond, they skip what bothers them, and focus solely on themselves, not only to empower themselves but more importantly, to heal their spiritual wounds.

Nel and Sula begin to discover how their bond can empower them unconsciously. Further, how this bond is going to affect their personalities accordingly. As for Nel, as I mentioned earlier, due to her relationship with her domineering mother she lacks confidence and self-respect. However, Nel with Sula feels comfortable in her skin and grows confident. Hence, she stops caring about her physical appearance and focuses more on her mind and soul. Nel after she meets Sula, accepts the natural beauty that distinguishes her, and learns how to embrace it. Nel stops using her nose pin and she “slid it under the blanket as soon as she got in the bed” (Morrison, 1973, p. 55). Moreover, she stops worrying about “the hateful hot comb” that she has “to suffer through each Saturday evening” (Morrison, 1973, p. 55) when her mother straightens her hair every Saturday evening.

As for Sula, as mentioned before, Sula has an agitated temper and a chaotic mind, she lacks a sense of belonging. Therefore, she always feels detached. With Nel, Sula feels cared for, her existence now matters to someone. Besides, when Sula is upset about the way her mother treats her, Nel comes to her “pulling her away from dark thoughts back into the bright, hot daylight” (Morrison, 1973, p. 57). Moreover, Sula does not understand how to show affection, and she “could hardly be counted on to sustain any emotions for more than three minutes” (Morrison, 1973, p. 53). Sula now is calmer and self-composed in the presence of Nel.

Moreover, Nel and Sula enjoy each other’s company and their souls become so intimate to the extent that they display their unity and bond through their little game. This is shown in an incident when Nel and Sula as young girls start playing in the grass play, they dig two holes, where “together they worked until the two holes were the same” (Morrison, 1973, p. 58).

Weems (2004) argues that Afro-American women have always shared an unbreakable bond where each member gives and receives equally. They form a supportive community demonstrating a strong sense of responsibility for one another and showing empathy for shared experiences. Their interactions are based on love, including constructive criticism, and the exchange of common and individual experiences. Nel and Sula know as black girls that through sisterhood they support and empower each other.

Furthermore, Nel and Sula as black girls, are learning that through sisterhood, they can love themselves and each other, while this love can be implemented in different forms such as care, support, empowerment, and the ability to stand for each other in a time of need. Furthermore, through sisterhood, they created a sense of selflessness as a result; they established an efficient relationship based on mutual nurturing, self-love, and the ability to erase insecurities. Oliveira (2011) points out that “Sisterhood creates the possibility for black women to develop their subjectivities by aligning themselves with girlfriends” (p. 50).

Moreover, Morrison demonstrates through Sula that sisterhood means making sacrifices and being selfless when it comes to standing up for each other. In this scene, Sula feels responsible for protecting Nel, when some boys try to harass Nel on her way to school, Sula rushes to protect Nel, and immediately, in an irresponsible act, she cuts her finger with a knife to scare off the boys, and eventually she succeeds (Morrison, 1973). Beckerman (1981) describes Sula’s act as irresponsible. From another perspective, Morrison tries to intrigue through *Sula* the reader into questioning the validity of sisterhood, when this bond faces life challenges.

Furthermore, Morrison puts Nel and Sula in two incidents, which jeopardize their relationship, and how they react accordingly. The first incident occurs when Nel and Sula were young and playing by the river. They meet a little boy named Little Chicken. Nel and Sula offer to play with him, and Sula “picked him up by his hand and swung him out [...] When he [Little Chicken] slipped from her hands and sailed away out over the water” (Morrison, 1973, pp. 60-61). Assumed to be dead, Nel and Sula are consumed with guilt thinking that they are responsible for drowning Little Chicken. As a result, Sula starts crying and collapses, but Nel is beside her comforting her and telling her “It ain’t your fault” (Morrison, 1973, p. 63). Sula feels safe and “stood up and allowed Nel to lead her away” (Morrison, 1973, p. 63). At the time of the investigation, Nel and Sula “did not touch hands or look at each other, there was a space, a separation between them” (Morrison, 1973, p. 64). Sula thinks that at any moment the sheriff will point at her and accuse her of murdering.

The other incident is when Nel and Sula grow up, Jude Greece a young ambitious black man, plans to marry Nel. Jude dreams of marrying someone who does not treat him like his mother, someone who can share with her his dreams, hopes, and plans. Jude wants to marry someone “who had never seemed hell-bent on marrying, who made the whole venture seem like his idea, his conquest” (Morrison, 1973, p. 83). This indicates the mentality of black men in how to be superior and domineering, forcing their desires and needs upon black women, Jude as the other black men desperately want to change their status in their community and climb the hierarchical ladder, and always unsatisfied with their status quo. However, Nel’s personality is quite the opposite. Morrison points out that Nel is a different person from Sula, Nel feels comfortable with Sula, and for Nel, Sula is her haven to go to if someone or something bothers her (Morrison, 1973).

Eventually, Nel chooses to be a domestic wife. However, this choice costs her to accommodate Sula’s friendship (Morrison, 1973). Nel withdraws from Sula’s life to prepare herself for her new life. Dharitri (2019) illustrates that “The two friends are compelled to start a life of their own by the society” (p. 3). Nel decided to marry according to the conventions of society. This shows how society-controlled women in the society through different social issues like marriage. Sula on the other hand chooses to leave, when she sees that Nel is no longer close to her, Nel now is busy in her new life (Morrison, 1973). Therefore, Sula leaves the town to experiment with something new, away from the societal conventions.

In this perspective, Morrison demonstrates to the reader the consequences of not maintaining sisterhood through Nel and Sula. After ten years, Sula returns to her hometown, and she becomes a replica of her mother, not different from Sula, Nel also becomes exactly like her mother. Sula is rebelling against societal conventions, she is having many affairs with men as her mother was, and she is careless and ruthless. On the other hand, Nel becomes a mother of three children always visiting the church and doing her sermons, she makes sure that everyone in town knows that she is an obedient housewife and follows the society norms. Sula visits Nel at her house and sees how Nel has changed and has three children, she is now occupied and there is no room for Sula in her life.

Nonetheless, Nel and Sula choose different paths. Sula chooses to be rebellious and does not abide by society's rules, while Nel chooses to be obedient, and follows society's instructions. However, none of them feels as happy or comfortable as when they were together. Sula feels deserted and outcasted, she does not differentiate between what is right and what is wrong, and she lives her life carelessly. While Nel yearns for a sense of belonging, she misses how to be loved by someone, someone who can understand her and feel comfortable with her, although Nel thinks that her husband Jude will compensate for the loss of Sula. However, she was wrong, Jude like any other Black man thinks of himself and his desires and focuses on pursuing his dreams alongside white people.

Nel and Sula’s reunion makes it possible for their bond to be established again because they need each other. However, everything falls apart, when Sula makes love with Jude, Nel’s husband, Nel feels betrayed, and cannot fathom the idea that her only, and dear friend could betray her. This second incident affects Nel and Sula’s bond forever, Nel could not forgive Sula for her infidelity with her husband. On the other hand, Sula with her troubled life and mind could not understand Nel’s reaction, considering the nature of their relationship she thinks, “She had no thought at all of causing Nel pain when she bedded Jude” (Morrison, 1973, p. 119). Sula also thinks that she never understood the concept of marriage for “having lived in a house with a woman who thought all men available” (Morrison, 1973, p. 119).

From the previous discussion, Nel and Sula’s behavior refers to the historical and social aggression that Afro-American women witnessed. Miller (2023) argues that the psychological effect of slavery and trauma on Afro-American women have been profound and long-lasting, the experiences of slavery including dehumanization, and violence, have had a

significant psychological impact on Afro-American women and their descendants. The historical trauma has become embedded in the collective memory of the Afro-American community. Afro-American women continue to experience racial trauma because of systematic racism, discrimination, and microaggression, contributing to ongoing mental health challenges.

This discussion leads us to Fanon's violence theory. Hilton (2014) examines Fanon's theory of the psychological effect of colonization and oppression. He argues that the experience of being colonized leads to profound psychological trauma and a sense of inferiority in the colonized people. Therefore, Fanon views the use of violence by the colonized as a response to the structural violence and dehumanization inflicted upon them. As a result, Sula rejects an obedient subjugated black woman, and she wants to live her life by her rules.

Shovon (2022) argues that "The main cause of the damage to the friendship is their "conflicting modes of moral perception" Sula learns to take care of herself and takes responsibility for her actions in ten years and thus becomes confident about her activities. In these years, Nel learns to take care of her husband and her children and becomes a little oblivious about herself. She feels insecure and loses her confidence because, in these years, she forgets to express herself" (p. 3).

Nel and Sula after this incident separate again. Nel believes that her life has been ruined because of Sula, therefore, she spends the time hating Sula and regretting her relationship with her. Nel misses Jude and thinks that he stopped since she left. Nel could move on with her life and hence fall into despair.

One day Nel hears that Sula is sick, and she cannot prevent herself from visiting her. In Sula's room, Nel sits and confronts her, and starts arguing about the reason that made Sula betray her only friend. While Sula is focusing on their friendship, their bond is stronger to be ruined by this insignificant incident. Sula reminds us that "if we were good friends, how come you couldn't get over it" (Morrison, 1973, p. 145). Nel and Sula in their subconscious are certain that they need each other more than they need men because they know how men are in their society. However, Nel is driven by her anger and denies the truth.

After a while, Sula dies because of her illness alone. Nel visits her grave in the cemetery, remembering every little detail about Sula, while Nel is walking, she stops "Her eyes twitched and burned a little. Sula? She whispered, gazing at the top trees. Sula?" (Morrison, 1973, p. 174). Nel now understands Sula's words, she understands that she needs Sula more than anyone in the world. Nel's final words are "All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude." And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. "We were girls together," she said as though explaining something. "O Lord, Sula," she cried, "girl, girl, girl girl girl." It was a fine cry – loud and long- but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrows" (Morrison, 1973, p. 174).

### **The Representation of Sisterhood in Aboulela's *Bird Summons***

In this section, the three main characters Salma, Moni, and Iman are discussed concerning sisterhood. The first character to discuss is Salma, who is originally from Egypt, her age is around forty. She is married to a Scottish man, and she has four children, she works as a massage therapist. Salma has a strong leading personality, when she speaks "people listen" (Aboulela, 2019, p. 16). Salma is a successful community housewife, she has a good job, and a good relationship with her husband who loves her and gives her freedom to do whatever she wants, moreover, her "four children were burly and good at everything: school, sports, hobbies" (Aboulela, 2019, p. 6). However, she could not stop the feeling of the cultural displacement "she [Salma] was the one who must always be making the effort to belong. Digging deeper all the time, craving connections, self-conscious that her roots, despite the children, might not be strong enough" (Aboulela, 2019, p. 33). Salma feels a deep longing for a connection to her home culture and struggles with the challenges of assimilating into a new society.

Back in Egypt, Salma first studied medicine, but her degree was not accepted in Britain, because it "was not sufficient" (Aboulela, 2019, p. 9), therefore, she tried to do the qualifying test, but she failed twice. Salma, heartbroken, starts to find other alternatives and trains herself to become a massage therapist. Moreover, Salma always feels alienated and distant from her family. She believes that her kids have a special language with their father, David. Salma understands every word they say, yet she does not know what they are talking about, she "would then feel that they were his [David] and not hers. She was the outsider, the foreign wife, and they were one unit" (Aboulela, 2019, p. 33).

Moreover, Salma's identity is fragmented, as she navigates between her Egyptian background and her life in Britain, Salma remembers how was to live in Egypt and misses life there, how she would take the bus with Amir, heading to have "Foul and Tamiyah and tea with mint" (Aboulela, 2019, p. 34) to eat for breakfast. Salma and Amir were to be engaged, however, everything changed when she traveled to Britain.

The second character is Moni, who is a Sudanese woman, who has a disabled son Adam who has severe cerebral palsy. Moni dedicates her life to taking care of her son neglecting herself and her husband Murtada, Moni rejects her husband's proposal to go with him as he has a good job offer in Saudi Arabia. Moni prioritizes her son's well-being and the medical care he receives in Britain.

Furthermore, Moni accuses her husband of being indifferent about his son's situation, while Murtada begs her to move on and return to her old self, how Moni and before Adam was positive and successful "with her higher-powered bank job and independence" (Aboulela, 2019, p. 13). Moni's struggle revolves around changing societal norms and stereotypes regarding disability and motherhood. Moni wants to find her own identity and break free from the confines of societal expectations. In Sudan when Moni and Murtada went to visit his family, for his brother's wedding, people were cruel and

judging about Adam's health status (Aboulela, 2019). Therefore, she would keep Adam at her room all the time to keep away predators off him and her and promised herself that she would never go to Sudan because people there do not understand.

The third character is Iman, who is a Syrian civil war refugee, and she comes to Britain seeking for better life. Iman longs for stability in her life as she is "in her twenties but on her third marriage. Once widowed, and once divorced" (Aboulela, 2019, p. 3), moreover, she yearns to be reunited with her scattered family members, especially her mother. Iman's second marriage allowed her to go to Britain but unfortunately, she got divorced after her husband was imprisoned. Iman meets Ibrahim in Britain, Ibrahim is a student at the university away from his family and alone in Britain, he is always afraid to have affairs with women, therefore, to prevent himself from sins, he seeks marriage, when he sees Iman, he is infatuated with her beauty, and marries her secretly, without the knowledge of his parents.

Furthermore, Iman's character is marked by her obedience and dependence on others. She consistently follows instructions and feels powerless to alter her destiny, despite her strong desire for a new sense of identity and self-awareness.

It is worth mentioning that all three characters are subjected to the stereotypical image that haunts Arab Muslim immigrants in Europe. Said examines the relationship between the East and the West, he argues that the Western knowledge about the East, particularly the Arab and Islamic world, is not based on objective understanding but rather on a set of preconceived notions and cultural biases. Said (1978) describes the Western academic and cultural discourse that perpetuates these stereotypes, portraying the Orient as exotic, backward, and inferior.

Aboulela sheds light on this issue, specifically Arab Muslim women who are misrepresented and marginalized in Western societies. Arab Muslim women in diaspora often find themselves at the intersection of multiple stereotypes and cultural expectations. They are not only subjected to orientalist depictions of being exotic and submissive Middle Eastern women but also face Islamophobia and the assumption that they are oppressed because of their religious and cultural background.

Salma, Moni, and Iman's unexpected friendship transcends their differences. Their interactions and shared experiences highlight the power of sisterhood. Despite their struggles and conflicts, they find strength in their collective support for one another.

Salma meets Iman throughout the Arab Muslim women group, that Salma leads. Since then, Iman has always been with Salma. Iman considers Salma as her family, for example, when Iman marries Ibrahim "Salma had helped her with all the preparations, hosting the henna party at her house and even sugaring Iman's legs for her" (Aboulela, 2019, p. 10).

On the other hand, Salma thinks of Iman as if she is her daughter, when the gap between Salma and her children widens as they grow older and "they became more British and less piece of her" (Aboulela, 2019, p. 7), she comes closer to Iman, Iman is always there when Salma needs her. Iman always knows Salma's intentions; therefore, she does not feel the need to justify her actions all the time.

Moni and Salma meet when Moni takes Adam for his massage therapy session, however, she does not find the two British therapists that she is accustomed to, rather, she finds Salma taking Adam to the session. However, Moni questions Salma's abilities, for being an Arab descendant, which indicates how Arabs are looked at and compared to the Westerners. Moni thinks that "Salma would neither be as professional nor as qualified as her British counterparts" (Aboulela, 2019, p. 30). However, Moni is surprised, when she finds that Salma "was even better with Adam" (Aboulela, 2019, p. 30) than the other British therapists. Moreover, Salma offered to give a session to Adam "free of charge" (Aboulela, 2019, p. 30) during Christmas vacation when the center was closed.

Since then, Salma and Moni have become friends. Moni admires Salma for the support she has shown amid her misery, and she feels secure knowing she has someone kind and supportive by her side. Also, Moni benefits from Salma as she works in a medical care institution and has all the medical knowledge and the proper practice, Moni can ask about Adam's health condition when it is needed. On their way to their spiritual journey Salma, Moni, and Iman start questioning the role of patriarchy in their lives, and what to expect from men within the diasporic context. Tom (2021) argues that women in diaspora may find themselves caught between the cultural expectations and their ethnic heritage and the opportunities for gender equality in the host culture. She adds that sisterhood provides a safe and supportive space for women to discuss also to challenge patriarchal norms, and to empower each other.

As for Moni, she believes that her husband is not supportive and does not care about his son's health condition. Moni feels alone struggling with her disabled son, her all she wants from her husband is to be by her side, reassuring her that Adam is going to be better. Moreover, Moni feels that she carries a huge burden on her shoulders, and she wishes that Murtada would take the lead so she could rest. However, Murtada's only concern is to be in a place where he can be himself in an Arabic country, and find a decent job, a place where he cannot be judged or always have to feel the pressure to live according to the West lifestyle (Aboulela, 2019).

As for Salma, Salma always compares her husband David with her Egyptian friend Amir. Salma admires her husband and admits that he loves her, he is supportive of her and also helps her in the house and the kids. However, she feels that he is indifferent when it comes to her wishes and needs, for example, when Salma's medical degree was rejected in Britain and failed twice in the qualifying exam, David did not encourage her to pursue her dream of becoming a doctor, on the other hand, Amir was always encouraging her to follow her dreams. Amir always addresses her as Dr. Salma (Aboulela, 2019), as he knows this is the only thing that she ever wanted in her life. Therefore, Salma, after all these years cannot forget Amir and starts to contact him over the phone, Salma feels alive again, she believes that Amir knows what she

wants, is capable of feeding her ego, boosting her self-esteem, and acknowledging her capabilities.

Finally, Iman questions the difference between marriage and prostitution, with her unfortunate marriages, she loses track. Iman was fifteen years old when she was married, therefore, she does not understand the concept of marriage. Iman thinks marriage is like prostitution the relationship between the man and the woman is based on reciprocal interests, "the man pays and the woman serves" (Aboulela, 2019, p. 35).

Therefore, when the three women reach the cottage, and as an act of rebellion, Iman starts to wear customs as a way of acquiring a new identity. She believes that she does not have the chance to choose what she wants, therefore, she thinks that now it is time to choose her path, "It is as if she wants to change her identity because of not being wanted or accepted in the West" (Awajan, 2023, p. 6). Eventually, Iman chooses to take off her hijab, because she wants to break free from traditions, as she thinks that she never chooses to wear it, rather it was forced upon her as an act of habit (Aboulela, 2019, p. 155).

From all that is mentioned above, the three women reach a point where they are overwhelmed, they are struggling to find the right path, and they are stuck in both worlds. However, now they must accept the change, by liberating themselves from the shackles of the past and their old mentalities through transformation. Awajan (2023) states that through their transformation, they can overcome their issues and adopt their new identities as Arab Westerners.

Throughout the novel, Salma, Moni, and Iman offer each other emotional support during their struggles. They listen to one another, provide comfort, and offer advice when needed. Sisterhood challenges the three women's perspectives in how they envision their struggle. Salma, Moni, and Iman, one of them, look at her struggle from her point of view. Thus, they either may succumb to disappointment or take decisions they may regret. However, their bond gives them a platform to confront each other to share mutual awareness. Salma, Moni, and Iman challenge each other by confronting one another about her downfall (Aboulela, 2019).

On the other hand, Salma and Iman confront Moni about the way she handles her life, they blame her for ruining her marriage. Salma says that Moni is prioritizing her son over Murtada and herself. Moreover, Salma advises her to make a balance in order to make her marriage work, while Iman adds that Moni is not a good wife, and pushes her husband away (Aboulela, 2019, pp. 153-157).

Furthermore, Salma and Moni confront Iman about taking her hijab off to fit in Western society. Salma explains to her that taking the hijab off is not a part of tradition, rather it is to protect her from men, and Salma advises her to concentrate on other things to build her new identity, rather than focusing on her beauty (Aboulela, 2019, p. 156). While Moni is suggesting implicitly that it is not by taking off her hijab Iman, it is about keeping their Muslim identity in the West.

Eventually, the heated discussion turns into a quarrel, and every one of them wants to prove her point. Therefore, Salma, Moni, and Iman feel distant from each other every one of them wants her personal space to contemplate her status quo. However, this is the tipping point for Salma, Moni, and Iman, for their transformation. Aboulela draws a vivid picture to the reader of their transformation, the internal feud that they have is represented as a physical metamorphosis. Awajan (2023) and Awajan and Nofal (2025) add that Salma, Moni, and Iman undergo a metamorphosis, transforming into different shapes and creatures. This transformation is a metaphor for the challenges they face as Arabs living in the West and their journey to construct new identities as Arab Westerners. Moni becomes a rolling ball, representing her feeling of being overwhelmed and trapped, Iman transforms into a grotesque mix of mammal and reptile, symbolizing her feeling of being caught between two worlds. Finally, Salma becomes immobilized, losing her strength, which mirrors her feelings of being powerless and trapped by her choices.

At the peak of their transformation, the three women in their unusual state cannot forget each other, so they start calling each other's names, except for Iman who loses her ability to speak. The three of them know that they need each other to overcome this predicament, therefore, when they meet, they "they clung to each other" (Aboulela, 2019, p. 208). Moreover, they feel the power of their togetherness a "unified effort" (p. 208), Salma and Moni say, "We are together" (Aboulela, 2019, p. 208), while Iman draws a large circle around Salma and Moni, and joins them as if she wants to say we are together as well (Aboulela, 2019, p. 208).

Furthermore, Salma's inability to move surrenders her to her friends, whom she trusts to lead her to the right path, and she knows that it is normal behavior sometimes, to ask for help and to be dependent. Salma also stresses the power of sisterhood "Sisterhood was the most valuable and worthy of investments. Moni and Iman might see her as their leader, but she was the one who needed them. She could not now move an inch without them" (Aboulela, 2019, p. 209).

Finally, together they overcome their transformation predicament, and it seems like it is an awakening or a rebirth every one of them now sees the full image, they see now what they are missing, and the moment of epiphany has prevailed. Iman embraces maturity along with accepting her Arab Muslim identity. Aboulela describes Iman's spiritual transformation as "she had grown up. She wore maturity like a cape and it was the best piece of clothing she had ever put on" (Aboulela, 2019, p. 217). Hence, this indicates that Iman now wants to start a new life, to be self-dependent, moreover, to care more about her inner self rather than her beauty. Moreover, Moni starts to love her life, also she changes her perspective, and she wants to handle her life differently, by embracing her son's health condition with love and not as a burden and having more children (Aboulela, 2019).

Finally, Salma stops putting herself down for not passing the medical exam to become a doctor (Aboulela, 2019), she learns to accept her fate that she is a skilled massage therapist, who has a loving husband and beautiful family, therefore she stops chasing the past and embraces the present. In the end, Salma, Moni, and Iman end their journey and return

together holding hands, through their unity they have healed, and they learn to forgive themselves and each other, enabling personal growth and emotional transformation. Aboulela uses the relationship between these women to depict the power of sisterhood and how women can find strength and solace in each other's company, even in unfamiliar and challenging circumstances. Through the characters of Salma, Moni, and Iman, the novel presents a compelling portrayal of sisterhood that resonates with the reader.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Both novels portray the complexities of female relationships, particularly the bond between sisters. In *Sula*, the relationship between the protagonist, Sula, and her childhood friend, Nel, evolves and is marked by love, betrayal, and reconciliation. Similarly, *Bird Summons* explores the intricate dynamics between the Salam, Moni, and Iman who embark on a spiritual journey to the Scottish Highlands, delving into their struggles and how they support and challenge each other. Additionally, *Sula* and *Bird Summons* share similarities in their exploration of the complexities of female relationships and sisterhood, portraying the multifaceted nature of women's bonds, the quest for individual identity, and the impact of cultural and societal contexts on these relationships.

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