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Going Beyond Migrancy: A Postmigrant Reading of Gish Jen's "Who's Irish" and Leila Aboulela's "Souvenirs"

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Abstract

The present paper examines the ways in which short stories, "Who's Irish" by the Chinese-American writer Gish Jen and "Souvenirs" by the Sudanese-Egyptian writer Leila Aboulela re-imagine states of belonging and family relationships in postmigration contexts. To do so, the paper adopts a postmigrant research perspective to analyze familiar key concepts such as belonging, home, family and identity. The concept of postmigration emerged in theater in early 2000's and then found its place in academic research with the aim of addressing gaps in studies on migration and broadening the perspective on the complex phenomenon of migration and its transformative effects on both immigrants and the hosts (Anne Ring Petersen, Moritz Schramm, and Frauke Wiegand 2019: 3). The paper draws on theories such as those offered by Roger Bromely on concepts of belonging and ethnicity to argue that even though these stories predate the academic conceptualization of postmigration, they represent the ways in which ascribed identities are challenged and new belongings are created. The research questions address how narratives under investigation problematize confining concepts on ethnicity, the ways in which family ties and relationships are affected in postmigration contexts and what these new spaces of belonging are like. The study concludes that "Who's Irish" and "Souvenirs" depict postmigrant "spaces of plurality" (Bromley 2017:39) which are conflictual but transcultural and trans-ethnic too.

Keywords: Belonging, Ethnicity, Gish Jen, Leila Aboulela, Postmigration

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1. Introduction:

Migration is an inseparable aspect of human experience in today's life so much so that our age is called "The Age of Migration" as the title of the noteworthy contribution by S. Castles and M. J. Miller indicates. It is one of the earliest (first published in 1995) interdisciplinary approaches to international migration and the ways in which it is responsible for the ethnic diversity of contemporary societies. People are on the move voluntarily or involuntarily for various economically, politically, culturally and environmentally propelled reasons. These movements are transformative, and both people and places are being changed as a result (2009: 16). However, the speed and extent of social transformations caused by migration are much greater than the scientific and political mechanisms involved in understanding and controlling them (Römhild 2017: 69). As a result, scholars have offered the concept of post-migration both as a condition, an intervention and an interdisciplinary theoretical perspective, more appropriate to understand and theorize migration and in "recognition of what has already happened (post-) as well as to a process of ongoing change" (Sten Pultz Moslund and Anne Ring Petersen 2019: 67). Postmigration shifts the focus from movement and geographical displacement to their outcome.

Literature provides a space to reflect on these heterogeneous and complex human experiences, and the value of literary representations in broadening the scope of knowledge by offering insight into social reality has been highlighted in previous studies (David Lewis, Dennis Rodgers, and Michael Woolcock 2008; Anke Bartels et al. 2019). To show how literature helps broaden our perspective on migration, the paper draws on postmigration as a conceptional tool to examine two short stories by Gish and Leila Aboulela to show the ways in which family relationships are affected, ascribed identities are challenged and new ties and belongings are created.

Gish Jen (b.1956) is a second generation Chinese-American writer who has published her work in various periodicals, anthologies and textbooks. Her work has won a number of awards and fellowships including, Lannan Literary Award for Fiction, a Guggenheim fellowship, a Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study fellowship, and a Mildred and Harold Strauss Living. (Gish Jen 2021). She writes about travel, issues of the lives and cultures of Asian Americans and migration in a way that, according to Lee, "requires us to wrestle with what counts as travel and to think comparatively across different textures of transit, mobility, and dwelling" (2002: 13).

Leila Aboulela, is a Sudanese Egyptian writer and the first winner of the Cane Prize for African literature in the year 2000 for her short story, "The Museum". She is one of the first Muslim immigrant writers who set out to the task of writing fiction that centers on the Islamic logic (Saleh Eissa 2005: n.pag.). Aboulela's collection of short stories, *The Coloured Lights* (2001) and her earlier novels portray the lives of Muslims in the west, their challenges and triumphs without the pretense of idealizing their experiences. In the author's more recent works, even though religion and migration are still important, they are no longer the main thematic concerns of these

narratives.

2. Significance of the Study

Interestingly, the short stories examined in this paper predate the formal theorization of the concept of postmigration, demonstrating that these narratives (and, by extension, literature) reflect the reality of social and cultural developments, driven by global movements, much quicker than the advancement of academic studies. Reading literature through the lens of postmigration has started less than two decades ago, making it crucial to explore the links between fictional narratives considered postmigrant and the evolving academic theories on postmigration. This allows us to see how literature and theory work together to reflect the complex and transformative nature of migration. Viewing society through a postmigration lens helps us become more aware of the significant yet gradual changes that migration has brought about over time.

3. Objectives of the Study

The present paper examines in "Who's Irish" and "Souvenirs" representations of the ways in which one's state of belonging and family relationships and practices are re-imagined in postmigration conditions. Moreover, the goal is to show the ways in which these narratives problematize confining and essentializing notions of ethnicity and belonging. Next, the paper analyzes the stories for changes in family ties, relationships and practices as a result of migration and mixed marriages. And finally, the paper tries to enhance our understanding of the ways in which postmigration as a perspective and condition creates possibilities and relationships to move beyond limiting labels.

4. Research Questions

1. How do Jen and Aboulela problematize confining notions of belonging and ethnicity?
2. How are family ties and relationships affected in postmigration contexts as imagined in the stories?
3. How do these narratives, portray the spaces of belonging as a result of a shift from vertical to horizontal orientation in a postmigration context?

5. Literature Review

One of the earliest analyses of "Whose Irish?" is offered by Rachel Lee who in the short but concise paper "Who's Chinese?" (2002) argues about the ways in which the story re-defines concepts of travel, displacement and home through the lens of feminism in a way that the familial power dynamics between the narrator and her daughter and the mother's displacement from her daughter's house allegorizes the traumatic experience of the first generation Chinese women in America, which, as the

narrator's case indicates, is both territorial and especially communal.

Bi-ling Chen's "A Grandmother's Seduction: Narrative Slippage and Ethnic Othering in Gish Jen's 'Who's Irish?'" focuses on the point of view of the story and through a close reading of the story discusses the ways in which Jen, through creating a charming yet unreliable narrator/protagonist whose confident dramatic monologue is filled with "factual errors and logical problems" (2012: 75), critiques the persistence of ethnocentric tendencies and stereotypes in American society and foregrounds the need that both immigrant and mainstream groups learn from each other to enjoy a shared state of prosperity.

Josipović, in "The Transformation of the Immigrant's Identity and the Traditional and Contemporary Cultural Concepts in the Translation of Gish Jen's Short Stories," examines the transformation of Chinese immigrants' identity in relation to American culture through Derrida's concepts of the *arrivant* and hospitality (2016: 287). She identifies the Chinese mother as the *arrivant*, positioned between guest and invader, whose presence triggers a clash between traditional Chinese and modern American views. Josipović argues that the story reflects Derrida's concept of conditional hospitality, where immigrants must adhere to terms set by their hosts (294). The paper also addresses the challenges of translating culture-specific concepts in Jen's works and suggests strategies as solutions.

Chang starts the argument in "Re-configuring Irishness: Tradition and Multicultural Identity Politics in Gish Jen's "Who Is Irish?" from the premise of Ireland's special, contentious and dichotomous relations with England and the impact on Irish identity. The chapter aims to show the story's problematization of the notion of homogeneity of Irish identity, a concept that historically played a central and unifying role to Irish people against the colonial context and was promoted in traditional Irish literature. It discusses how Jen unsettles stereotypes around Irish identity, sexuality and gender roles, exemplifying " a growing acceptance of multiplicity and difference of the Irish identity" over the recent past decades (2020: 58).

Scholarly interest in Leila Aboulela mostly revolves around the themes of migration, identity, religion and representations of Muslims. Most discussions focus on her novels, with fewer examining her short stories. Among the latter, Tina Steiner, in "Strategic Nostalgia, Islam and Cultural Translation in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* and *The Coloured Lights*," argues that Aboulela employs "strategic nostalgia" to critique both Orientalist and Islamist narratives (2011: 7). Steiner emphasizes the role of religion in shaping identities not bound to a specific location, resisting assimilation in secular Britain.

In "Home in Exile in Leila Aboulela's Fiction", Ileana Sora Dimitriu examines fictional portrayals of home and exile, as well as the loss and rediscovery of faith in transcultural contexts in selected short stories from *The Coloured Lights* and novels, *The Translator*, *Minaret* and *Lyrics Alley*. These narratives challenge the rigid notion that home is inherently tied to a place of origin, suggesting instead a nuanced

understanding of home as a state of mind and "alternative forms of rootedness, in which home-in-faith is perceived as an antidote to a fractured life " (2014: 78).

In "Confronting Stereotypes and Seeking Fulfilment in the Hostland: An Analysis of Muslim Female Characters in Aboulela's *Elsewhere, Home*" (2019-20), Feuerhahn García argues that Aboulela challenges negative, historical stereotypes of Muslim women's weakness. These stereotypes involve cultural, religious clashes and societal interactions. Her characters are portrayed as non-conformist women who actively resist these challenges in the West to create space for themselves and their families, striving for personal fulfillment.

The most relevant work in regard to "Souvenirs" is Lena Englund's "Toward Postmigrant Realities in Leila Aboulela's *Elsewhere Home*" (2020) which examines the ways in which Aboulela challenges traditional notions of gendered and religious identity and mobility. The focus shifts from the displacement of individual characters to viewing migration as a transcultural phenomenon and a process involving interaction and participation and struggle. However, "Souvenirs" is briefly mentioned in the paper which has a holistic approach to Aboulela's recent works and follows a developmental path in the author's work on migration.

As we saw, the scholarly analyses of the two short stories deal with important migrant concepts such as intersections of race and gender, integration and distinction between the majority and minority, identity and problematizing stereotypical representations of immigrants mostly with a focus on the first generation immigrant characters. However, from a postmigration perspective, as the change is ongoing and transforms both sides, these key concepts can also be analyzed a bit differently and in relation to postmigrant generations and the need that the society adapt to these ongoing transformations. Thus, the present paper intends to address this gap in scholarship by contributing to this flourishing body of literary analyses.

6. Theoretical Framework

The term postmigration first appeared in UK in mid-1990s in academia and ethnological studies as a critical concept in debates in postcolonial studies on identity and problematization of stable notions of culture and ethnicity, and Since then, the neutrality of concepts such as "culture", "society" and "ethnicity" in migrant studies, have been challenged in an attempt for a deeper understanding of their political implications (Gaonkar, Øst Hansen, Post and Schramm 2021: 23). Gerd Baumann and Thiil Suneir, as early as 1995, emphasized the need to de-essentialize the discourse of ethnicity in post-migration contexts for its monolithic tendencies which has reified the concept of ethnicity and ethnic groups as homogenous and cohesive entities. This conception, they argue is reductive and does not allow for the "ambiguities of commitment and identification" (qtd. in Gaonkar, Øst Hansen, Post and Schramm 2021: 4) and allows for the justification of the relations of power. In the same vein, Roger Bromley calls attention to the need to de-essentialize the "so-called migrant

coherences and homogeneities" in his definition of postmogration as "a status" and "a critique" and a "useful concept for exploring the conflicts and contradictions, the dialectic of belonging and unbelonging" and the ways in which individuals dynamically and creatively construct their identities amidst societal challenges (2017:36). The problem with ethnic discourse, he argues, is its too much emphasis on ethnicity and cultural difference which results in further othering, marginalization and legitimization of inequality and discrimination. He posits that "the prefix 'post'" is used both in the "temporal" and "epistemological sense" because "it raises the question of how, and what point, someone ceases to be thought of as a 'migrant' or in terms of their supposed ethnicity" (36).

Theatre director Shermin Langhoff first introduced the term "postmigrant" during a workshop in Berlin in 2004, later applying it to an independent Berlin theatre in 2006. Her aim was to reflect the diversity of contemporary German society and challenge the notion of the migrant as the "other," in an effort to dismantle the dominant cultural discourse on migration. The success of postmigrant theatre sparked academic interest in the concept, exploring its potential in migration debates and as a response to the negative use of "migrant" as an imposed identity (Peteresen, Schramm, and Wiegand 2019: 6). Germany's history of postwar migration and its diverse migrant population and intersections of race, ethnicity, religion and socio-economic status in the experiences of these migrants have provided rich materials to engage with the issue. Therefore, the prefix "post" does not indicate a break or termination, and as Naika Foroutan observes:

> 'Post-migration' aspires to transcend 'migration' as a disguised marker for racist
> exclusion, on the one hand, while embracing migration as social normality, on the
> other. Hence, the term post-migrant does not seek to depict – as falsely assumed and even criticized – a state in which migration has ended […]. Rather, it provides
> a framework of analysis for conflicts, identity discourses and social and political
> transformations that occur after migration has taken place (2019: 150).

Therefore, postmigration provides a critical lens to view migration as an inseparable part of today's social and political reality and a process of ongoing change.

According to Gaonkar, Øst Hansen, Post and Schramm (2021), artists employed the term as a strategic position taking in a way that by "intermingling of scholarly, political, cultural and artistic engagements, the concept can offer complex, interdisciplinary understandings and conceptualisations of contemporary Europe and its challenges" (13-14). Peteresen, Schramm, and Wiegand explain that postmigration acknowledges the widespread recognition that migration has fundamentally reshaped society. It reflects a growing awareness among the public and politicians that this

transformation is not sudden but ongoing, affecting everyone and requiring further adjustments (67).

According to Gaonkar, Øst Hansen, Post and Schramm, the term can be conceptualized in three areas:"(I) postmigrant generation, (II) postmigrant society, and (III) postmigration as an analytical perspective". Postmigrant generation refers to the descendants of immigrants whose identity issues, state of belonging and complex cultural heritage is very different from those of the first generation immigrants, yet this complexity has not received enough attention in the society, in a way that, their experience is always defined through the lens of migration even though they have not experienced displacement (2021:19). This perspective opposes labeling, recognizing that people may have multiple belongings.

They explain that a postmigrant society shifts the focus from immigrants to the entire society, emphasizing that immigration affects everyone, not just those who have relocated. This conceptualization "emphasises conflicts, obsessions and negotiations taking place in societies shaped by migrations, including conflicts around representation, racism and structural exclusion" (20). The third way of conceptualizing postmigration as an analytical perspective has been offered by Moslund/Petersen (2019: 67). They maintain that the term is no longer exclusively applied to the "cultural productions by migrants and their descendants" and can be applied to every art product (68). According to Gaonkar, Øst Hansen, Post and Schramm, extending the application of the concept beyond a certain social group, "makes apparent how dichotomies, which often go unchallenged, are 'contingent and can therefore be changed'", and thus, "can be understood as critical interventions in the public and academic discussions" (22).

Moslund explains that postmigration literature has four main features: rejecting labels and getting rid of obligations of representation, not monothematically dealing with "immigration or black experience, shifting from 'dramas of movement, hybridity and double vision, and finally, becoming post-racial and post-ethnic" (2019, 95). Scholarship on migration has also called for a greater attention paid to issues in regard to family aspects of migration (Kraller 2011) and gender relations (Hibbins and Pease 2009). The present paper, thus, examines "Who's Irish" by the Chinese-American writer Gish Jen and "Souvenires" by the Sudanese-Egyptian writer Leila Aboulela and their representations of family practices, generation gap and belonging as spaces that shed light on postmigration conditions in which the displacement and homesickness is no longer the focal point in character' experiences.

7. Discussion

7.1. The Changed State of Belonging and Ethnicity

A postmigration reading of *Who's Irish?* offers new perspectives on belonging, ethnicity, and whiteness by portraying life in a postmigration society where relationships and identities evolve over time. Jen explores the future of migration and

the complexities of identity shaped by intercultural marriages. It explores themes of cultural identity, generational conflict, and particularly, new postmigrant ethnicities. The story is narrated by an elderly Chinese immigrant grandmother who struggles to understand the American way of life embraced by her daughter, Nathalie, and her Irish-American son-in-law, John. At the story's start, the grandmother lives with her daughter's family, caring for her unruly granddaughter, Sophie. The main conflict stems from the grandmother's traditional Chinese values clashing with her daughter's modern, permissive parenting. Her support for corporal punishment causes tension, leading to her displacement. She eventually moves in with Bess, her Irish son-in-law's mother, finding unexpected understanding and companionship across cultural divides. The narrator is a first generation immigrant woman from China and a successful former restaurant owner, now a widow and a grandmother who relates her story of banishment from her daughter's home and her grievances to an unknown companion. She claims that her ideas are deeply engrained in traditional Confucian and Chinese culture and mores, but indeed she eclectically cherry picks those ideas which only benefit her arguments in a way that her perspective is very narrow and biased (Chen, 2012: 74-77). She associates her positive features such as hardworking and fierceness with Chinese culture and her granddaughter's wildness with her paternal Irish culture (Jen 2003: 1390). In her essentialist views, she attributes her daughter's success as the vice president of a bank and her son-in-law's inability to hold a job to their respective Chinese and Irish cultures. If she could have been taken seriously in her self-appointed role as the speak person of Chinese and Confucian tradition, her sweeping generalizations would have perpetuated cultural stereotypes on both ethnic groups, but underneath the highly humorous and ironic tone, the narrative critiques the expectations placed on the so called immigrant authors to be representatives of their ethnic background and/or cultures of origin. According to Chen, the narrator's "insistence on upholding her parental dominance and authority in racial terms . . . widens the cultural gaps within the family" (77).

The dominant view of migration studies endorses a culturalist perspective which emplaces migrants and their future generations in the unchanging and problematic category of "ethnic others" whose success or failure depends on their ability to integrate into the majority culture (Romhild 2017: 69). Critical migration research finds too much emphasis on ethnicity problematic since, as a result, "non-ethnic categories of belonging and distinction are ignored" and this perspective turns ethnicity into a "straight jacket" and "fails to move beyond the migrant world" (70). Nattie's rejecting labels and constantly requesting her mother to stop saying "Irish this, Irish that" (1390) foregrounds the need to not be restricted by such confining ethnic categories. She might even feel more American than she looks Chinese. Moreover, being married to some one of Irish ancestry and having a child together, Complicates the task of ascribing labels to people even further. She continues, "How do you like it when people say Chinese this Chinese that . . . . You know, the British

call the Irish heathen, just like they call the Chinese" (1390). She refers to the Irish and Chinese common minority status in the eye of power in an attempt to move beyond racialization and ethnicization and a step towards a future transcending such labels which is really important for children of migrant parents specifically for those who are the fruits of inter-ethnic and inter-racial marriages. Nattie's perspective can be called postmigrant because, to borrow from Bromely, unlike her mother, hers is both "linked in" and "detached from" the concept of diaspora for its emphasis on "a present and a future trajectory rather than anchorage in an 'originary' culture" (37), while her mother still emphasizes the superiority of Chinese ways and culture and is unaware that such exclusive ethnic attributes are responsible for perpetuation of discrimination and structures of inequality. A postmigration perspective, then, calls for a shift in perspective in a way that while the focus is on the minorities, it does not forget "the ethnically unmarked majority society" (Romhild 70). Thus, even though the story speaks of a desire to move beyond ethnicizing remarks, it does not underestimate the difficulty of this shift of perspective. One reason for this difficulty is the dominant notion of the naturalness of whiteness.

It is now more than three decades have passed since the publication of Peggy McIntosh's seminal essay, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" (1989) which emphasizes the importance of reflecting on the taken for granted benefits enjoyed by white people, benefits which are not earned but conferred to them only due to having the privilege of whiteness on their side. Similarly, according to Romhild, one of the ways in which postmigration might enrich critical theories on migration is to problematize "the politics of ethnicisation" which places migrants in a set of cultural containers along the margins of the 'majority society'" (67). Through a shift in perspective, the focal point becomes "the national society of immobile, white non-migrants" (70). This shift in the story will help denaturalize the notion of the white majority as non-migrant and delicately problematizes the presumed homogeneity and common status of the white majority and makes whiteness visible by historicizing it and referring to its constructed nature.

The narrator once refers to the common history of building transcontinental railroad and contributions of both ethnic groups to the American society. She points out, "I always thought Irish people are like Chinese people, work so hard on the railroad, but now I know why the Chinese beat the Irish"(2003: 1390). Despite, her dichotomous reasoning, and her over extending the case of the Shea boys to all the Irish, her juxtaposing the story of the Chinese immigrant's mobility to that of the Irish, draws one's attention to the ways in which these immigrants have a share in building the American society as well as their shared minority status at the time of nation building. It offers a new insight by making migration more visible and as the foundation of the American society today. As we will see, this is a useful reminder on the social construction of the whiteness and the changed status of the Irish ethnicity.

A look at the history of the presence of the Irish in the United States of

American Identity reveals race as a fluid and context bound category. The peak of Irish immigration to the U.S. was during the Potato Famine of the late 1840s, but the Irish were present in the history of America since the Colonial Period. However, they did not enjoy the same legal status as immigrants from Northern and Western Europe. They along with Jews and immigrants from the eastern and Southern Europe, were subject to discrimination (Moloney 2009: 103-105). According to Bi-Ling Chen (2021), Irish immigrants in the 19th century were in the same category of African-Americans and indentured Chinese, and at times were forced into competition with these groups. They were labeled as non-white by the US government and they were considered racially inferior to the mainstream Americans until the first half of the twentieth century (82). Clearly, as Mary Waters explains, the discrimination experienced by white European immigrants "never matched the systematic, legal and official discrimination and violence experienced by blacks, Hispanics, and Asians" and that the immigration laws in the twentieth century provided a better trajectory for the social and economic mobility of white ethnics in a way that "the drastic reduction in immigration from European sources" enabled social and generational mobility to these people and blacks, Hispanics and Asians filled their spaces for unskilled jobs in 50's and 60's (1990: 165).

Sophie's Irish –American uncles' constant remarks on her unusual brown-ness highlights the privileged state of whiteness. The general assumption is that intermarriages between whites and dark-skin races would result in children with paler skin tones compared to that of the colored parent. The narrator notes, "So brown. Nattie is not that brown, they say. They say, It seems like Sophie should be a color in between Nattie and John. Seems funny, a girl named Sophie Shea be brown. But she is brown, maybe her name should be Sophie Brown. She never go in the sun, still she is that color, they say. Nothing the matter with brown. They're just surprised" (2003: 1392). Even Bess, the most open-minded white person in the family is guilty of uttering racist remarks. Her assuring remarks on Nattie being "as good as white" (1392) are not only explicitly racist, but speak of her position of power, for Bess's decree guarantees Nattie's worth equal to a white person even though, in a reversal of gender roles, she is the bread winner of the family and holds a prestigious job, while her husband struggles to remain employed. Moreover, Bess's well-intentioned remarks reveal her lack of awareness regarding her discriminatory language. Therefore, even though the history of the presence of the Irish and Chinese in the US is marked by systemic discrimination and racism, they cannot be considered as equals. As Chen notes, "to people whose ancestors' Caucasian identity was arbitrarily denied, whiteness is not only a norm, but also a treasure" (2021: 82). Emphasis on Sophie's brown-ness on the part of her uncles and paternal grandmother might be an implicit reference to past racial fears in the Irish people's collective unconscious, reminding them of their own history of brownness and the shaky state of their treasured whiteness. The narrative, thus, exposes the shifting and constructed nature

of whiteness and its privileged status.

The story problematizes definitions of Irish, American and Chinese identities on another level as well. The title is interesting since the main character is a Chinese grandmother, and one might wonder why the title is not "Who's Chinese?". At the end of the story, Bess, Nattie's Irish mother-in-law, offers Nattie's mother a place in her house and nominates her as "honorary Irish" (Jen 1398). Even though this nomination means an extension of the host's hospitality towards the guest, in the context of postmigration, it can delicately gesture towards nuances of power dynamics among minorities. Extending Irishness to the Chinese woman, on the one hand, exposes the "absurdity of ethnic classifications" to borrow from Romhild (70). On another hand though, while the story mocks the absurdity of such classifications, it shows a recognition of the enduring power of these categories. As it was previously mentioned, "post"ness of postmigration conditions does not indicate an end to the race thinking, and more needs to be done to achieve the pluralist ideal of an equality of heritages.

According to Waters, symbolic ethnicity is a voluntarily adopted ethnic identity which fulfills the person's desire for expressing his/ her individuality while belonging to the mainstream American community. This concept, however theoretically pluralist, positive and inclusive, is not available to all in practice. In reality, non-white minority groups cannot equally enjoy this flexible identity with no social and political consequences (150-56). Waters refers to the disparity between the ease and natural-ness of the slipping in an out of their ethnicity for the white Americans and the experiences of racial minorities (157-58). Waters explains that the reason for this difference is the misconception on the part of people with the European origin that all ethnicities are equal (160), while in fact, she notes, "the degree of discrimination against white European immigrants and their children never matched the systematic, legal and official discrimination and violence experienced by blacks, Hispanics, and Asians in America" (164). The drastic change in the experiences of the eastern and southern Europeans indicates that " ethnicity is historically variable" and that the complexity of symbolic ethnicity is both dependent on generational movement as well as social mobility (165).

Therefore, the ease with which Bess grants honorary Irishness to a person of Chinese origin implies the white donor's power or authority to offer it to a non-white person and at the same time the difficulty to understand the experience of a non-symbolic ethnicity. Thus, being "an honorary Irish" rings as a privilege, while there is no parallel invitation on the part of the narrator to offer Bess the title of honorary Chinese, nor does it occur to the latter to desire it. Moreover, while Bess might enjoy the choice of being American or Irish or ascribe Irishness to the narrator, her granddaughter who has a dark skin, despite her Irish genes, might have difficulty to present herself as Irish in future. In response to her sons asking when the guest will go home, Bess assures them that, "She's a permanent resident. . . . She isn't

going anywhere" (Jen 1397). The question recalls a familiar reaction of the part of the mainstream Americans to immigrants, asking them to go back to where they came from, not accepting the irreversibility of the move that took place decades and even hundreds of years ago and also forgetting their own history of immigration and that they were an ethnic minority at some point in history. Even in the postmigrant conditions of today, the "hierarchy of these ethnicities", as Chen observes, indicates that the mainstream society has still a significant distance in moving beyond superficial gestures of acceptance confined to "the realm of ethnic food, trinkets and clothes" and towards true acceptance and understanding (2012: 85).

Similar to "Who's Irish?", "Souvenirs" from *The Coloured Lights*[1] explores the challenges of belonging, mixed marriages and generation gap, and the focus of the story is not on larger sociopolitical forces that shape and govern the society, but on dynamics of family relationships, impressions and uncertainties. The central character is Yassir, a young Sudanese man who works in Scotland and has a Scottish wife and a 3-year-old daughter. The reader traces Yassir's life through his present condition as experienced from inside (through free indirect speech intermixed with limited omniscient narrative point of view from outside). Thus, the reader mostly meets Emma through Yassir's perceptions of her and flashbacks from memories and fragments of conversations between the two. He returns home to Khartoum to visit his family, but Emma, his wife, refuses to accompany him. She asks for souvenirs, beads and paintings, instead. To purchase the paintings, the day before his return, Yassir and her sister, Manaal visit an English painter and his wife who, to their surprise, have been living contentedly in Khartum for 15 years. To Yassir, migration from Africa to the West appears natural, whereas the reverse seems unexpected. According to Moslund, one of the features of postmigrant fictional works is that they are "not monothematically about migration or immigration . . . " (2017: 95) by which he means that international border crossings are now a commonplace and normal part of our globalized contemporary life, rather than something extraordinary or "spectacular" (97). Migration, for the characters in "Who's Irish?" is in the distant past and Yassir is based in Aberdeen and works in oil rigs of the North Sea, her sister's employer in Khartoum used to be a Danish aid agency and the British Ronan K. and his wife have been living in Khartoum for a long time, and he is commissioned to paint for the Hilton Hotel in Khartoum, a multinational company and a symbol of globalized networks of economic connections. There is also the Romanian woman who is married to a Sudanese man and her daughter, Zahra is Manaal's friend. Migration, though a defining aspect of these individuals' lives and consciousness, has become normalized in a postmigrant society. Consequently, it is not an extraordinary phenomenon and is of lesser interest. Even though a first generation immigrant, Yassir is not pained by being away from home. The story is set in Khartoum where he returns for a visit, experiencing brief moments of nostalgia reminding him of his childhood, but he

[1] The story re-appeared in *Elsewhere Home* in 2018

seems content with his decision to move to Scotland. Nor do issues of blackness, whiteness or discrimination appear to be of concerns to him in Aberdeen.

Against the context of complex transcultural ties and relationships, Bromely stresses the importance of taking into account "a range of relatively new cultural and representational practices which have produced, and … produced by, what might be called provisionally, new postmigrant ethnicities " (2017: 36). In a way that he considers the term "diasporic cultural fiction" a limiting designation since these practices" speak of new aesthetic, new narrations, and new belongings' in a way that it might be both "linked in' and detached from" the concept of diaspora" in so far as the practices emphasize a present and future trajectory rather than anchorage in a 'originary' culture" (37). Moslund explicates one of these differences in reference to an important lecture by Bromely in 2011 in which he compares the issue of belonging in diasporic narratives with more recent fictional works. He observes that in former narratives, the issue of belonging works vertically through "highly symbolic sentiments and rites" and "nostalgic notions of origin, changing identities, and lost imaginary homelands", while in recent works, this vertical structure of feelings is "replaced by a 'horizontal' orientation" which is described "in terms of locality. . . " (2017: 104). He explains that due to the complexity of human's experiences, these horizontal emotional ties might shift and change at any moment and depending on the context. They even might "reinforce or contradict each other", hence instead of "roots", "ease and unease" are used to describe feelings of belonging or a lack of it (104). According to Moslund, belonging is "a continual everyday process of impermanent feelings and self-invention in a series of contextually shifting social roles and relations" rather than markers of racial difference such as skin color (105). Ronan K. refers to the airplanes taking off from the airport near his house, "I see the fat bellies of planes full of people going away" (Aboulela 28). According to Englund, this reversal of roles, Ronan, the white immigrant staying in Khartoum and people like Yassir leaving, "indicates a sense of home, . . . suggesting a certain permanence" and a "blurring of majority versus minority society, of migration becoming part of society in multifaceted ways." (2020: 6). In another place we read:

> For Yassir, Emma was Aberdeen. Unbroken land after the sea. Real life after the straight lines of oil rig. A kind of freedom. Before Emma, his leave onshore had floated, never living up to his expectations. And it was essential for those who worked on the rigs that those onshore days were fulfilling enough to justify the hardship on the rigs. A certain formula was needed, a certain balance which evaded him (Aboulela 13).

Here, Yassir's wife anchors him to the place, and his emotional attachment to his wife is also expressed in terms of locality. Metaphorically, Emma stands for stability, freedom, fitting in, a replacement for roots, for home. Now home is elsewhere, in Aberdeen. In contrast to vertical orientation, horizentality is shifting, and thus, one's feelings of belonging might fluctuate between states of "ease and unease of

presence" (Moslund, 2017: 104). Therefore, during his short visit of Khartoum, his feelings of belonging to Aberdeen are often attacked by his mother's implicit refusal to acknowledge his marriage by constantly asking about his wife's name, pretending to forget and assuming that his five-year marriage and his three-year-old daughter could be easily erased from his life and be forgotten simply "as a man's experience", while to Yassir, it is "a fact, a history" and a part of his present and future identity (Aboulela 13, 14).

In "Who's Irish?" the narrator is horizontally tied to her daughter's household where she feels entitled to belong, as her remarks on Chinse cultural mores on the importance of children's taking care of their elderly parents indicate (Jen 1391), so much so that according to Lee, her expulsion from her daughter's home is even more traumatic than the initial displacement in leaving China. Here, the territorial significance of Chinese ethnicity is replaced with familial ties and "appropriate gendered and generational behaviors. . . . Home is any place where one's family resides (2002: 4). On the bright side, however, the narrator's move to Bess's house as a "permanent resident" (Jen 1397) and their bonding suggests the possibility of restructuring and forming new belongings and relationships beyond filial and ethnic ties in postmigration contexts.

On their way to the painter's house, Yassir's sister stops by her friend's house to inquire about the address. Zahra is a Sudanese/Bulgarian whose cappuccino skin tone, "dark-grey eyes" and "thick eyebrows" reminds Yassir of his own daughter and how she will look like Zahra in future (Aboulela, 21). Zahra's mother is originally from Bulgaria and, to Yassir's surprise, is away on Hajj pilgrimage, but she has declared that after her return, she will not start wearing long sleeves, nor will she cover her head. She speaks "grammatically incorrect Arabic with a Bulgarian accent. (19). According to Bromley, "postmigration is an active storying, a bringing into narrative a specific set of new belongings and affinities, projected towards the future and woven, eclectically, from different and contradictory voices in an act of contestation, and is not solely the property of locally born" (39). Zahra's mother is one such example of the complexity of postmigrant state of belongings. She prays and fasts, but refuses to cover her hair and arms even after returning from Hajj. Yassir admires Zahra's father for his strength and confidence in converting his wife to Islam yet struggles to grasp the Bulgarian woman's active role and independence in eclectically establishing such affinities with Islam the way she is comfortable and in contradiction with stereotypes. Therefore, as the story shows, these affinities and complex filliative and affiliative ties form Postmigration culture (Bromely 39).

7.2. Mixed Marriages and Family Relations in Postmigration Contexts

Yassir and Manaal finally find Ronan, the British painter. His paintings "[m]ost were of village scenes, mud houses, one of children playing with a goat, one of a tree that had fallen into the River" (Aboulela, 29). The reader who might have awaited a long time to discover what Yassir brings back for his wife, will ultimately be disappointed.

He purchases three paintings, one of which is the children with the goat because he thinks his daughter might like it. The content of the other two are not mentioned.

Poulter observes that souvenir objects are associated with "individual experience" and function as conduits "for personal memory and identity" (2011: 265-66). They are "valuable indicators of the formation and transmission of meaning, identity and memory across cultural boundaries at particular times and places", and therefore, the significance and value of souvenirs more than their materiality, is quite personal and private and determined by their owner (267). Yassir's souvenirs cannot bring Khartoum to Emma, and therefore, the subject of the painting is not worth mentioning to the narrator. They have no personal significance to him.

Even if the souvenir objects had held of special emotional value for Yassir, their meanings would have remained inaccessible to Emma. He bought some beads at Emma's request, and the paintings were representations of his homeland produced by a foreigner. Moreover, they represent rural environments which, as Riaño Alonso points out, stand in contrast to "the highly-urbanised landscapes crossed by Yassir and his sister during their journey to the painter's house" implying the painter's catering to Orientalist expectations of the potential buyers (2017: 55). Ronan's remark about not hanging his paintings in his own house might imply that these realistic paintings do not represent the reality of the place after all.

The title of the story is just "Souvenirs" preceded with no definite article. Therefore, the representational aspects of the paintings are not a primary concern; they do not represent what is important to Yassir, who reflects, "The things he could not deliver. Not the beads, not the paintings, but other things. Things devoid of the sense of their own worth. Manaal's silhouette against he rig's flare, against a sky dyed with kerkadeh. The scent of soap and shampoo in his car, a man picking his toenails, a page from a newspaper spread out as a mat. . . ." (Aboulela 21). These fragmentary images and the way they sensuously engage Yassir signify the reality of Sudan, family and what is close to his heart and sadly cannot be taken to Emma. He wanted Emma to come with him to Africa "not to 'see', but so that Africa would move her, startle her, touch her in some irreversible way" (28). These unendeared souvenir objects offer insight into the dynamics of Yassir's marriage.

Evidently, a problem of communication exists in this couple's relationship, partly due to Yassir's reluctance or inability to familiarize Emma with his homeland despite a few years of marriage and the presence of a daughter. Apparently, since their daughter is only three, Emma does not accompany Yassir for the fear of endemic diseases and postpones a visit for an indeterminate future. Her simplistic question regarding what tourists bring from Khartoum (Aboulela 16) is some how off-kilter as it reveals her lack of familiarity with her husband's birth place, but more importantly, her indifference. Her interest is as shallow as a tourist, an occasional visitor, not as a person whose daughter is half Sudanese. She might not be the only one to blame since, apparently, Yassir has not tried to tell her about Sudan and Africa either, so

her knowledge is limited to cliché's and negative stereotypes. None the less, Yassir's shortcoming in changing Emma's perception of Africa as a place she "never heard anything good about" (17) is not backed up with details regarding politics even though her fear of Africa as a dangerous place, and people's suspicion about Ronan being a spy, gesture towards the historical misconceptions of the East and West's about each other. In contrast to Aboulela's short story 'The Museum, which shares thematic similarities, the narrative details do not explicitly suggest that broader power dynamics, such as colonialism or racial discrimination, underlie the communication difficulties between the two characters, despite subtle indications that could account for Yassir's lack of self-confidence or Emma's disinterest. The couple's problem in communicating about Africa does not seem to affect their relationship at the moment. Emma does not give much thought to Yassir's place of origin or heritage, and Yassir, when in Aberdeen or busy in oil rigs, seems to be focused on his present life. However, from a postmigration perspective, the stakes involve the future development of their daughter's relationship with her Sudanese heritage. Yassir senses the problem but not its urgency until in a moment of epiphany towards the end of the story, when after two weeks, he talks to Ronan K. in English, he refers to it as "Emma's language", and even though he misses his wife, he misses her in a different way, "with the grim awareness of distance" (28). This existential realization marks the disruption of "an ease of presence" and maybe even a sense of the loss of authenticity for Yassir. He becomes aware of a kind of distance which is not physical.

As we saw, the main conflict of "Who's Irish?" is mostly generational, yet the cultural differences that exacerbate the mother- daughter friction are heightened as a result of a mixed marriage. Unlike the narrator's defining herself in ethnic terms and through the values of the original culture, her daughter does not look back to an originary past and is more willing to secure ties with the American society. However, as a second generation immigrant she has to navigate the challenges of family expectations while seeking to carve a niche for herself as a career woman, a wife and a mother as a visible minority.

Through her self-serving logic, the grandmother, initially, intends to maintain her authority in a postmigration milieu where new circumstances demand compromise, understanding and adjustment. Therefore, even though she attributes "fierceness", which she associates with hard work and assertiveness, to herself and Nathalie and a reason for their success in America and as female members of an ethnic minority, and a sign of their superiority to the Irish, another ethnic group, in relation to different parenting methods and Nathalie's attempts to maintain balance between her mother's expectations and her spouse, the narrator calls her uncaring and ungrateful. As Bromley notes, "Postmigration is both a process of discontinuity and something which is always under construction, distant from tradition and custom or, at least, detached by reflexive critique" (40). Thus, banishing her mother from her house is a painful decision, but in her attempts to own her unique identity, Nattie has

to resist her mother's manipulative ways of thinking and set boundaries to protect her relationship with her husband who sporadically suffers from depression and is in and out of jobs. It needs mentioning that in both stories, Bess and Manaal function as peace makers of strained family relationships. Bess, by providing a place for Natti'es mother and offering companionship keeps her within the family circle though at a distance. She seems to understand Nattie's dilemma of standing between her mother and her own family. And Manaal tries to lessen the friction between her mother and brother and gradually opens a space for her accepting a Scottish daughter-in-law. While both stories conclude with open endings, they offer a glimmer of hope for reconciliation between child and parent.

8. Conclusion

Migration, understood within a postmigration framework, is not a one-time event but a dynamic process that reshapes the society; this necessitates a holistic perspective to grasp its complexities. The present paper made an attempt to examine the formation of postmigrant perspectives and ties as imagined in two short stories by Jen and Aboulela. The stories demonstrate that such perspectives, though anchored in a particular geographical location, transcend and transform the original ties and identifications. Instead of concerns for integration or acceptance by the majority, they foreground concerns of future, postmigrant generations, personal challenges such as parental expectations, child-parent dynamics and the evolving nature of identities and marital relationships. "Who's Irish?" maintains that essentialist and culturalist views, whether they exist in majority or minority groups, are no longer valid and whiteness, despite its privileged status, is also an ethnic category, historically constructed and subject to shifts. It also shows how non-ethnic, horizontal categories of belonging are being formed as a result of inter-cultural and mixed marriages. "Souvenirs" depicts postmigrant pluralist spaces in which globalized English and other languages exist side by side where migration is becoming recognized as an ordinary practice in contemporary times, and as a result of which, new belongings beyond filial or ethnic ties emerge. These spaces, as both stories indicate, are trans-ethnic, trans-cultural and future-oriented and evolving particularly regarding mixed marriages and children of such unions. They are also conflictual, diverse and remain a work in progress where true pluralism remains elusive.

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