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"Radio Drama Revisited: Laila Aboulela's The Museum and The Sea Warrior"

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ABSTRACT

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Radio drama belongs to the broader term 'audio literature', a genre that includes both literary and intermedial studies. Radio drama has been underestimated and unappreciated during its history on four grounds: rarity, invisibility, audience negativity and "secondariness". The aim of this paper is to defend radio drama and counter these criticisms, proving that radio drama has its own merits. Accordingly, its success should be judged only on its ability to convey whatever catches one's eye to one's ear, and its ability to give the listeners the same sense of a full-length stage play. Theoretically, an analytical approach will be applied to the selected plays in order to show how radio drama succeeds in conveying visuality via the use of four overlapping elements: descriptive dialogue, sound effects, narration, and character. Aboulela's *The Museum* and *The Sea Warrior* are hereunder selected for research.

Radio Drama at the Court of Criticism

Horst Priebnitz (1983) has likened the present case of radio drama to a guilty person taken to the court and put directly into prison without any investigations or defence. The most famous criticism against radio drama are rarity, invisibility, audience negativity and “secondariness”. One of the problems of radio drama is the fact that it is difficult to find any broadcast material available either to the public or to academic researchers, which is embarrassing. As a result, there is a shortage of audio literature studies within the bulk of literary criticism. Up to the researcher’s knowledge, nothing has been published so far about the two selected radio plays. The absence of published versions of audio literature adds fuel to the fire. According to Tim Crook (1999), “radio drama has shared with stage theatre an evanescent art form status. If the script does not survive and there is no permanent recording, how are we to evaluate the artistic experience...Most early radio plays created by the BBC and other international broadcasting organisations have not survived as mechanical records” (6-7).

Add to this the fact that very few plays are stored on cassette tapes. This shortage affects the evaluation of the audiotext because the recording and the script are two sides of the same coin. Briefly, radio drama lacks the two pillars upon which academic research is based - terminology and theories. Terminology is needed to define, discuss, understand, and evaluate radio plays, while theories are necessary for the avoidance of chaos coupled with drama productions. Rodger adds that the difficulty of having a theory of radio drama rests on radio drama producers who are

facing the dilemma of bringing theatre within the reach of everybody. Creating a radio drama form, “MacNeice and his contemporaries did not work out this manner of approach in accord with any preconceived theories relating to radio drama. He was never given to discussing theories of composition and was generally obsessed by the need for meticulous phrasing and linguistic precision” (Rodger, 151).

Four production problems are the main reasons for the rarity of radio plays, as stated by Rodger. The first is that many people think that drama is a form of art that is written only for theatre, otherwise it is an adaptation. The second is the problem of translation that can lead sometimes to the loss of hidden meanings in a play or the lack of understanding some humorous remarks like jokes, wordplay, and double entendre because they are socially bound. The third is the clash between radio producers and playwrights over financial reasons: “producers would then argue the case for a play to be commissioned and while a very few writers would sometimes insist that what was eventually broadcast was entirely the fruit of their own work and imaginings” (119). Add to this the fact that many theatre playwrights, like Arthur Miller and Eugene O'Neill, were afraid that radio productions would lessen their theatrical fame.

It can be safely argued that the real development of radio drama occurred during the fifties due to the harmony between radio producers and playwrights. Radio drama proved a major success when Alfred Bradley became the head of the drama studios in Leeds in 1961. He spared no effort in inviting world playwrights

to send him their scripts (Rodger, 120). This is considered an achievement because television was a medium of mass entertainment back then. Radio plays keeps prospering to the extent that some playwrights achieved theatrical success and their moments of glory came after writing for the radio (Rodger,122). It is worth mentioning that Martin Esslin developed the form greatly, when he became the head of BBC Radio Drama during the period from 1963 to 1976 (Gray & Bray, 292).

The second criticism against radio drama is invisibility. Radio drama is lacking in performance visibility to such an extent that some critics argue that there is no need for having famous trained actors to perform, and the possibility to employ any amateur or an ordinary person whose role resembles that of real life (Rodger, 13). Radio drama has been labelled as blind, invisible, and dark during its history. It is labelled as such despite the fact that radio had been unconsciously visual before visual arts like television, painting, and photography existed. These words (blind, invisible, and dark) are used in the two senses: literally and metaphorically:

When the world's first radio play, *Danger* by Richard Hughes, was broadcast in 1923, people were advised not to let their children listen for fear they might be frightened. They were also advised to hear the play in the dark. "It was somehow believed that this new drama for an audience which had no eyes could only be appreciated by simulating blindness. It was thought that if people listened to the play in a lighted room, they would be distracted by their furniture from imagining the scene being fed to their ears (Rodger, 15).

Invisibility is a two-edged weapon. It gives the radio playwrights many advantages, while it places a heavy burden on them. The reason for this is that they

have to convey both senses: visual and audible. Generally, radio drama has to convey whatever catches one's eye to one's ear. Radio writers manage to fulfil this task through the skilful use of dialogue:

The complete dependence on the ear requires the radio dramatist to use dialogue to set the stage, introduce the characters, and describe the action. The radio writer, however, has no time for extended development. His dialogue must translate stage business and yet tell a story in a rigid framework of thirty minutes... Dialogue must be brief for another reason too. A character appears on the radio stage only when he talks. If one character speaks for a long time, all the others fade out of the listener's consciousness (Kaplan, 25).

Invisibility of radio drama gives both writers and producers more freedom than stage drama. For example, the author is free from the unity of place imposed on the stage play. He can move freely across the four corners of the universe. William Matthews illustrates more:

With visual realities absent, the radio writer can lead his audience by the ear anywhere he pleases; he can commune with atom or star, he can soar into the empyrean or plunge below the earth's crust without hindrance or absurdity; he can have actresses as beautiful as Helen though they be as ugly as sin itself; he can summon spirits from the vasty deep (42).

Besides, the radio writer does not worry about the actors' appearance, costumes or their movements on stage.

Thus, invisibility should not be a line of attack, because each literary genre has its own merits, each genre appeals to one of the five senses. Béla Balázs and Russell Stockman liken literature to a building having five doors where one can choose only one for entry (48). Naturally, the judgment is based upon what a genre has, not what it lacks. Besides, drama is not the only genre that lacks vision, poetry also does. But the idea is that the dramatic sound text is always unfairly compared to the performance/stage text (McMurtry, 2019). Being narrative at the first place, like the novel and the short story, radio drama must not have to be visual. The more it is different from the stage play the better, for radio requires imaginary presentation, which is impossible to be presented on stage.

This difference between the sound text and the stage text leads the argument to the third criticism against radio drama, which is absence of the audience. The stage is a social activity/art that requires a gathering while the audio text is not. The nature of each is different. Any show depends mainly on the presence of an audience for its success. Radio audiences often listen to the radio alone without any sense of a shared occasion, even if surrounded by others. This lack of gathering is empowering in judging radio drama. For everyone listens alone and has his/her own judgement, unlike stage drama.

The last criticism is “secondariness”. The term means that the role of the listener is passive (Hand & Traynor, 33-5). In this sense, I agree with both Frances Gray and Janet Bray who state that the role of the listener depends on the kind of the audience

themselves. In this regard, there are two kinds of audience: those who are interested in literature itself, and those who listen just to pass time (294). “Secondariness” has another meaning. It refers to where the radio is placed in the car, for example, as it is always located at the background (McMurtry 239). McMurtry’s viewpoint hits the nail right to the head, for radio drama is basically criticized for invisibility. The following section of the paper attempts to show practically how radio drama manages to translate the sense of visibility via the use of four overlapping elements: descriptive dialogue, sound effects, narration, and character.

The corpus of the present paper includes two selected radio plays by Leila Aboulela - *The Museum* and *The Sea Warrior*. Aboulela is a Sudanese writer, born in Egypt, to an Egyptian mother and a Sudanese father. She has moved to Aberdeen because of her husband’s work. Therefore, most of her works, if not all, address multiculturalism and are set mostly in Aberdeen. She has published many novels, including *The Translator* (1999), *Minaret* (2005), *Lyrics Alley* (2010), *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015), *Bird Summons* (2019) and a collection of short stories, *Coloured Lights* (2001). Although Aboulela is worldly known as a novelist and a short story writer, she has written many radio plays and one short stage play, *Friends and Neighbours*. Her radio plays include *The Lion of Chechnya* (1998) and *The Sea Warrior* (2001). Her adaptations for the radio are *The Mystic Life* and *The Museum* (Aboulela, 2020). *The Museum* and *The Sea Warrior* are transmitted via the Internet. The former is an adaptation of the Caine Prize 2001 short story, “The

Museum” and the latter is originally written for the radio. Hence, a differentiation between adaptation and originality should be discussed first.

Internet radio drama from *The Museum* to *The Sea Warrior*

The present paper is concerned with radio drama transmitted via the Internet, not via the traditional radio broadcasting. In fact, this platform helps the spread of radio drama production. In an attempt to negate, or at least lessen the previous criticism against radio drama, “The internet is an ideal means of mass distribution for experimental forms of audio drama, some of which could perhaps be more accurately described as ‘sonic art’... it is the internet that presents the most flexibility for listening to audio drama” (Hand & Traynor, 59-60). The internet not only helps increase radio drama, but it also helps deepen the role of the audience. The listener becomes more positive than before. Tim Crook adds more advantages to internet radio plays. The first is that the listener can control the time and the place s/he can listen to the play since it is an open access network. Second, the Internet deepens the relationship between the writer and his/her audience in an interactive way, unlike stage drama. On the one hand, the writer can share autobiographical information with his/her audience. On the other hand, it gives the listeners more time for both listening and commenting. This deepens the listening experience by giving the listeners the chance to comment on events, real or fictional, as they unfold. Finally, this new technology decides both the position and value of the writer via the various contributions (1999,44-5).

Besides, difficulties with radio drama which arise from production, seem to be overcome now—thanks to the Internet. Famous channels like BBC Radio 4

responded positively to the digital age and began to launch many digital-only channels. It can be safely said that the Internet is considered the most significant development for radio since the transistor radio (Hand & Traynor,69-70).

Two forms of internet radio drama

Radio drama falls under two categories: those adapted to the radio and those written originally for the radio. Aboulela's two plays, *The Museum* and *The Sea Warrior* represent the two categories respectively. *The Museum* is a radio play adapted from a short story under the same title, first published in 1997 and then served as primary text for the adapted radio piece in 2001, to be loaded only in 2013 (#storyFriday: The Museum by Leila Aboulela. www.youtube.com.https://youtu.be/CTWn6wg4k8A). *The Sea Warrior* is written originally for the radio and was broadcast by BBC Radio 4 in 2001. In 2007, it was published, for the first time by *African Writing Online* (<http://www.african-writing.com/aboulela.htm>). Some critics, such as Morris Cohen, Elke Huwiler and others, argue that both short stories and novels are more successful when adapted to radio plays than stage plays, to such an extent that young writers are always advised to write short stories first before writing radio plays. Gradually, they can adapt their writing to the radio. This process of re-writing attracts the attention of many producers who guarantee the success of these adaptations (Cohen, 181).

This is exactly what happens with Aboulela's *The Museum*. After winning the Caine prize for the short story in 2000, it was adapted to a radio play and broadcasted

by the BBC Radio in 2001. It is worth mentioning that the BBC Radio, among many “major commercial broadcasting groups, has decided to invest in the development of Digital Audio Broadcasting since 1994. Over 200 internet service providers were now in business in the UK, of women writers rating 52% (42) in 1998” (Crook, 1999, 39). Aboulela is a pioneer in women’s writing. In order to alter the written word pictures of a story into the spoken word pictures of a radio play, Aboulela depends on a careful use of dialogue, few characters, sound effects, simple narrative, and descriptive language.

There are many differences between adaptation and originality in writing for the radio. Generally, adapting literary pieces for the radio precedes writing mainly for it. Elke Huwiler states that most English-speaking countries still depend on adaptations of literary works as material for their radio productions (130). To some extent, adaptation is easier than original writing. Adapting short stories into radio pieces is not difficult, especially if the author is the same.

However, adaptation process is creative, for the writer does not copy and paste. S/he keeps adding things to the text to suit radio's requirements. The least that can be added is sound effects which add a new layer to the story, even if it is literally copied (Huwiler, 137). In a larger context, alterations in all levels of narration — story, storytelling and discourse is needed. Huwiler adds that in adapting a radio piece, everything is extended (135), because the audience do not only listen to the narrator’s voice, but to the other characters’ too. In all cases, radio versions should

be economized as much as possible. Experienced radio writers observed that writing for the radio require summary and understatement (Rodger, 150).

In a personal communication with Aboulela about the difference between the two strategies: adaptation and writing originally for the radio, she remarks that writing for the radio, in both cases, means gaining a wider audience:

Both are challenging in different ways. Writing originally allows for greater freedom and more choices. Adaptations start off from a more confident position. *The Museum*, as a short story, had already been read by many and had won the Caine Prize before I adapted it. The challenge was in bringing it accessible to a wider audience and also conveying the actual museum video through audio ... It is a nice change to write for radio when I am in between novels. The audience for radio already exist, I do not have to seek them out as I do with books. My writing and my stories are then reaching a wider audience who might not have read my books. I have met many readers over the years who told me that they first learnt about my work through radio (Aboulela, 2021).

The dramatic text can be rendered as either theatrical performance (visual) or narrative discourse (audible). The latter is distinguished from the former by only the lack of visibility, that can be easily compensated using description. Description, thus, is the cornerstone of radiodrama. It fulfils many dramatic functions which are discussed in detail in Werner Wolf and Walter Bernhart's *Description in Literature and Other Media* (2007). From its opening scene to its end, radio drama is descriptive.

The opening scene in any drama is the most important one, for it introduces

the audience to the main characters, paves the way for the events of the play and states the mood of the play. Radio drama, especially the opening, should be economical because of the word limit. The first few minutes are crucial in drawing the listeners' attention to the play and preventing them from turning or switching off the program (Mader, 195). *The Museum's* theme is uttered early at the very beginning of the play with a narrator saying, "can romance overcome the culture gap when Africa comes to Aberdeen?" (Aboulela, 2013). This opening line bears the most common features in all Aboulela's writings — romance and cultural shock. When asked in an interview about the use of romance in her works, Aboulela answers that she likes this genre since childhood, and that it has affected her life and writings greatly (Chambers, 97). Cultural gap/ shock is a current theme of most of Aboulela's writings because she used to move between the opposite poles; from heat to cold, from a religious Muslim society to a secular one, from the Third World to the First, from the South to the North (Chambers, 87).

The opening lines of *The Museum* are uttered by a narrator who is often employed in radio drama for different reasons. Practically, description is much cheaper than dramatizing any scene which involves many actors and more studio time (Hand & Traynor, 37). The narration describes the play as a romance, giving much information in a word. Being an important element in radio plays, voice captures the audience's attention from the beginning, making them focus on the two main themes of the play: romance and cultural gap, which are uttered together at

one breath. Besides, the use of question technique adds more excitement and suspense. Questions always hold the listener's attention making him/her interested in following up the story to the climax.

By the same token, *The Sea Warrior* opens with Nafisa's voice-over commenting: "He kept pestering me. Talking about things I had pushed to the margins, things I wanted to forget. He kept pestering me and getting in the way ... and I can't be sorry for what happened to him at the end" (Aboulela, 2001). The author keeps the listeners in suspense from the very beginning making them anxious to know the story narrated from the past in flashbacks. The narration itself functions as a description of the unknown man, his past, his role and his end which seems to be tragic drawn on the information given in brief. Such information should be brief, lest it should lose its effect.

Not only should the story of the radio play be stated directly, but the characters should also be introduced presently, their social and mental status, attitudes, and previous history. As the drama proceeds, the function of both narration and description changes depending on the new places the characters visited and the new people they met. Directly after the opening lines of *The Museum*, Aboulela takes her listeners to the background of her play where the cultural shock between Sudan and Aberdeen begins. It is a noisy setting of the university cafeteria in Aberdeen where many students from different countries — England, Lebanon, Ethiopia, and Sudan discuss their diploma courses. The African students, in particular, suffer

much from the advanced system of English education compared to the poor African one. Asafa, the Ethiopian student says that their poor system of education cannot afford educational resources, such as textbooks and calculators (Aboulela, 2013).

Education is not the only example of cultural shock that the Africans experience in Aberdeen. In a comprehensive/perfect brief description, Shadia, a Sudanese bride-to-be who is preparing for her master's degree, expresses her shock of Bryan's appearance: his yellow soft ponytail that resembles the hair of her cat when she used to stroke and comb. Likening him to her favourite cat, Shadia draws this visual picture for Bryan, which is full of motions and colours, and paves the way for the romance between them. The given description of Bryan contrasts with Shadia's black Sudanese complexion and hard-curly hair, a physical appearance which is evoked and not mentioned. However, it is quite possible that the contrast is the cause of attraction. It is worth mentioning here that the silky hair was Shadia's wish in the short story. In the radio version, Aboulela makes it Bryan's hair to find a reason of attraction between the couple from the beginning. Shadia sees her dreams coming true watching Bryan's hair.

The visual description shifts to a verbal one in *The Sea Warrior* so as to inform about the background of the play. Verbal signs work on three levels in radio drama: 'theatrical', which can best be described as dialogue, 'textual', which is most commonly achieved by narrator and 'emanation', where words can be heard, but not understood, such as the words of a distant crowd (Hand & Traynor, 41).

One form of theatrical speech is achieved via the telephone conversation between Nafisa- now in an oil rig in Aberdeen, and her sister in Khartoum. Nafisa apologizes for her inability to attend her sister's wedding because she is offshore. The conversation sets shortly the clash between old traditions and new future expectations for women in Sudan. Marya, like most girls in Sudan, dreams that she gets married and has a family of her own. Nafisa is exceptional; she finishes her petroleum engineering degree and now gets her training in an oil rig, onshore and offshore. She is also the only woman there, that is why she cannot attend her sister's wedding, a conduct that Marya could not understand or forgive. The sound of the telephone is called *On-the-air* sound or as materialising sound indices. It is one of many electronic propagations like radio, television, or telephone (Crook, 1999, 86).

Since the sense of hearing is mostly associated with radio drama, Aboulela is very careful about when and how she drops her words. The aforementioned conversation not only sets the problem of the play but keeps the listeners stunned at the dilemma facing Nafisa. Aboulela shifts from this conversation or what Mader calls "verbal language in interaction" to "verbal language in the form of monologue" (Mader, 194), to reflect and involve the listeners in Nafisa's struggle. In a soliloquy, Nafisa discloses, "I was *new*, a *woman* and *black*. I expected to find hostility" (Aboulela, 2001, emphasis added). The same three italicized words used by Nafisa can be understood as points of weakness, but they

are empowering, as will be shown in the course of the play.

Aboulela uses her radio plays to shed light on social and political issues such as multiculturalism, diaspora, feminism, and racism as Louis MacNeice did before her. These serious issues and powerful subject matter are necessary, for they attract the listener and add more depth to radio drama. The writer's most effective means to achieve this is conversation, which presents the writer's point of view and helps him/her develop his/her plot and characters. Aboulela successfully manages to turn simple conversations among overseas students in *The Museum* into a political indirect debate.

Gradually, Aboulela involves her audience deeper in the problems of her country. The first issue is looks. In Scotland, any black is an African, a generalization which bothers the Africans themselves. They defend their identity strongly, especially when they are abroad. Shadia likes to be called a Sudanese, Safaa, an Ethiopian, distinguishing themselves from their Nigerian colleague who committed suicide the year before, possibly for his inability to cope with the western culture. In fact, this is the stereotyping which Aboulela discusses in her two plays:

By stereotyping, one is therefore placing boundaries: people might assume their membership to a community only because they share a set of ideas that make them both equal to a group of people and

different to others. However, this is not only a matter of labelling and drawing lines in between groups, but these ideas are many times the basis of racist behaviours (García, 5).

Racism is less obvious in *The Museum* than in *The Sea Warrior*, maybe because Shadia finds relief or ‘collective consciousness’. She is among a group of colleagues who share race, class and diaspora together — two Africans and a Lebanese among many others. In *The Sea*

Warrior, by contrast, Nafisa finds herself alone among a group of men, of whom Marden is the most racist. One day, Marden leaves her a cartoon drawing of a golliwog, which is a racist incident that should be reported, but she did not. A few days later, Marden speaks frankly to Nafisa and tells her that Ed recognised her at the heliport because she is as black as the Ace of Spades. It does hurt Nafisa, but she is still unable to take action.

Like theatrical performances, racist and tragic events are rather reported in radio drama. The two examples of racism, as well as the Nigerian student's suicide in *The Sea Warrior* and *The Museum*, respectively, are reported than directly enacted, which is another level of narration. The term 'narration' here "serves to cover a multitude of generic variations which consist in choosing either mimesis (the mode of showing) or diegesis (the mode of telling) or combining both in variable ratios" (Mader, 188). Obviously, Aboulela prefers using diegesis. This technique enables her to dig deep into her African characters to reflect their reaction to racism while being abroad. When Ed asks Nafisa to report against Marden, she refuses on the ground that it is the first time for her to be offshore and she doesn't want to be a nuisance. Besides, she knows that Marden tries to spook her, but she would not let him get to her. Despite her anger and fear from the unknown, Nafisa shows courage and establishes contact with the two men there, hence illuminating Aboulela's idea about the successful fighter woman (García, 5). By the same token, in *The Museum*, Asafa advises Shadia to stop being oversensitive and try to accept

the others. He tells her that all of them need to have thick skins to survive.

This level of narration turns to be a discourse rather than a story. Mader differentiates between the two terms as follows: the story is whatever told or represented, while discourse is how the story is presented (Mader, 190). One way of narrativity is flashback. The process of recalling is narrative where a story unfolds chronologically through flashback (Crook, 1999, 176). Thus, the plots of the two plays are presented through flashback technique so as to give justifications for the present attitudes of characters and explain what happened in the past.

Flashbacks compensate for the lack of visual representation, but they should not be used too much in radio drama, otherwise, they should lose its effect. Thus, Aboulela has smartly used flashback twice in the two plays. The first occurs in *The Museum* to give a background of Shadai's family life, her education, her parents' divorce, and her engagement to Kareem. The second and more important use of flashbacks occurs in *The Sea Warrior* to provide information about an accident that occurred in the oil rig years before the play started, a story known to no one except for Marden and Ed.

Description overlaps with other modes of communication, such as interpretation and narration in unfolding the accident via a series of flashbacks. First, the verbal signs dominate the scene as Marden tries to remind Ed with the accident and its details. Then, the verbal signs shift to audible ones using sound effects to express Ed's worries about his family, for Marden apparently knows

everything, not only about the accident, but also about Ed's personal life. The audible signs heard through "word scenery", include "a high proportion of descriptions, both of 'static' objects as well as of 'dynamic objects' (Mader,189). The static objects are clearly seen in the stairs, the rig, the radio room, while the dynamic objects are represented by walking, running, talking and answering the phone, calling, telephone ringing, the outdoor sounds of the rig and the whistle of the wind. Both static and dynamic objects keep the audience's suspense about the details of the accident. This same scene of the answering machine, with all the aforementioned acoustic signs is an audio subtext where acoustic signs alone are used to reflect the character's past and prepare for future events.

Besides, this short conversation is depicted mostly using sounds to give the listeners a hint about Ed's family. Sound is the most important element in radio drama which is termed also as "sound text". Hand and Traynor divide sound into three categories: sound effects, acoustics and perspective. "Sound effects" are 'live' or pre-recorded sounds, usually juxtaposed with dialogue, which signify an event... or a location". 'Acoustics' is the nature of the space in which the drama occurs... 'Perspective' indicates the spatial relationship between characters within the drama: distant or close, to left or right" (44). Sound effects can be found in outdoor sounds of the rig, the ship and the whistle of the wind. These sounds cause realistic effect. Acoustics are rich in the radio room with all its natural human voices of both Ed and the operator as well as the recorded ones: "Sound of a number being

dialled. It rings and then the voice of Cynthia on the answering machine” (Aboulela, 2001). Perspective effects are represented by Ed running up the stairs, getting out from his cabinet to the radio room and back again. These acoustic signs are vital for radio literature because they are examples of audio literary artefacts which create fictitious worlds by means of ‘aural mimicry’ so as to portray an imaginary version of the world (Mader, 1984). This evokes the listeners’ feeling that there are two distinct settings of the play all the time: the sea and the land, while they are not.

Compared to *The Museum*, *The Sea Warrior* makes a greater use of sound effects. This is because it is located in a ship rig, a new feature of radio drama, as Crook states that in pre and after war times, there was an overseas interest in drama taking place in a ship or a boat and the use of sound effects (Crook, 2020, 105). Sound effects of *The Sea Warrior* are superb because of Aboulela’s use of the song *Hotel California*. When asked about the choice of such a song, Aboulela replied, “I felt that the lyrics suited the story” (Aboulela, 2021). The song actually suits both of the imaginary settings of the play: the land and the sea.

These acoustic signs pave the way for a higher level of description where there is a series of eye-witness reports. A vivid example is when Marden, the only witness of the accident, tells Nafisa at Ed’s presence, about the forgotten accident. The description at this stage of the play focuses solely on the character of Marden, the unknown character coming from the past to pester the characters about their past

lives. The more detailed description given to Marden by both Ed and Nafisa, together with his own voice, the deeper he lingers into the listeners' consciousness. Mader adds that bringing someone to the consciousness of the audience is a hybrid form mixing both the dramatic and the narrative (204). In addition, the death of Marden at the end of the drama is completely told via sound effects. He and Ed keep fighting till Marden's breathe is heard. Ed beats him and leaves his dead body lying at the rig. Marden's dying voice is kept unheard because of the sounds of the wind and the motor. He finally returned to the past where he came from.

Another description which gives the sense of reality to radio drama is achieved by "describing 'surfaces' of objects and giving specific sense data" (Mader, 202). The two selected plays depict women's conquering of the fields of mathematics, computer science and petroleum. Thus, the diction used is highly relative. Word choice is very essential part of radiodrama. The words chosen in *The Museum*, such as MSc, stochastic processes, time series, linearmodels, HIV, poison distribution, queuing theory, multivariate analysis, and many others, have two functions. First, they utilise Aboulela's professional background. Holding an MA degree in statistics, Aboulela always employs scientific words in her works. Second, such mathematictheories match the theme of multiculturalism because Bryan says that everything, "follows probability". Talking about human relationships, multiculturalism, and the extent to which the "Other" can be accepted and dealt with, can never be definite. It really follows relativity and probability.

In a similar vein, *The Sea Warrior* makes use of many scientific words such as oil, oil ring, machines, flow rate, video camera, technology, full-length survival suits in gaudy orange, trainee PE, drilling engineer, aircraft, emergency exits, life rafts, lifejacket, helicopter, the radioroom, oil and grease, the flare, graphs and statistics, balaclava, etc. Besides, the proper name Nafisa itself is used in Arabic culture as a reference to precious and rare metals, which are similar to the character traits of Nafisa who always feels that she is different from other girls like her friends and sisters. Comparing herself to her sister Maria, her neighbour Rere and the other girls, Nafisa concludes that they have no ambition at all. They only dream of getting married and having fun. This brief description of characters, in the words of Mader, is, necessary in audio literature (193). Nafisa gives an account of her sister and neighbour in *The Sea Warrior*, so does Shadia in *The Museum*, mostly of her mother and her fiancé, Kareem. She tells Miriam that her mother encouraged her to accept Kareem mainly because he has a Mercedes and 7up franchise. The description does not only state Kareem's richness but it tells much about Shadia's mother. Shadia adds that her mother wants her to be a friend with people of higher status so that she gets married. The mother left her education to get married but she was divorced later. Therefore, she tries to encourage her daughters to finish their postgraduate studies first before marriage so as to spare them her misery.

Both description and narration set the cultural and social background of

Sudan. It is not customary for Sudanese women to stay long away from their families. Ed also comments on Nafisa's ambition saying that it seems quite rare in Sudan that a woman be a petroleum engineer. Both Ed and Marden's comments on Nafisa reflect the Western perspective on Muslim countries as being very conservative and narrow-minded, hence widening the gap between the two worlds (García, 3). Kareem also tells Shadia that he is so broad-minded that he allows her to travel halfway across the world by herself and to stay alone for nine months in Europe. Both Nafisa and Shadia should take the chance, apart from the consequences, because chances like these are very rare.

Throughout the course of the two plays, Aboulela swiftly manages to turn simple conversations among overseas students into a political debate by means of indirect allusions. Here lies the glory of radio plays. The main challenge of writing for the radio is the writer's ability to say everything possible by means of dialogue. Aboulela alludes to the problem of borders between Sudan and Ethiopia, the civil war in Ethiopia and the refugees coming to Sudan, and many political issues in a short conversation between Shadia and Asafa.

The problem of borders is one of the sub-plots discussed in the play. Another sub-plot is the idea of the other. As *The Museum* proceeds, Bryan and Shadia became no longer colleagues, but representatives of two opposite poles, cultures, mentalities, religions, and above all different persons. Looking at the mirror, Shadia sees the reflections of herself and Bryan like two who wouldn't look nice together.

Such realization paves the way for the end of this unrequited love between Shadia and Bryan. The Museum experience is the touchstone both for the love story and the radio play, in general. Although Aboulela makes a possible friendship between Shadia and Bryan, she reminds the audience continuously that such a relation is brief because Shadia has already been engaged to Kareem before the play starts:

Radio drama, like stage theatre and film, needs the essential paradox of human consciousness: that unrelenting and vulnerable desire and willingness to be intensely moved by something that does not exist, never has existed, and never could exist. Curiously in radio the imagination of the listener has to fictionalise the idea of performers attempting to prevent an audience from forgetting that the play is all an illusion (Crook, 1999, 72).

Part of this paradox is due to the cultural clash between the East and the West, in which the former feels superior, even in matters associated with personal relationships, from romantic to fear and hatred (Steiner, 10)

The conversation between Shadia and Bryan inside the museum summarizes Edward Said's ideas of "The Other" and Colonialism. Aboulela's *The Museum* is a microcosm of all museums that stand for "the interrelated politics surrounding museums as institutions of power, sites of knowledge production and of memory and memorialization that construct particular narratives of the past and present, cultural spaces which narrate the nation; and as "contact zones" or spaces of encounter, exchange, and conflict" (Arora, 1). Aboulela manages to bring all the main characters of the play in this final scene: Shadia, her parents, Kareem and Bryan, in order to foreground Sudan and to counter all the stereotypical images of

backwardness, famine and war by presenting Sudan as a valid place. Of course, none of them has any physical presence except in the listeners' mind/ imagination. The listener has to imagine the presence

of the museum itself, with all its exhibits, together with the characters, through aural scenography, a technique connecting the imaginary presence of characters with what is being said about them. It involves also the evocation of place, whether it is real or imaginary, present or past (Stanton, 98-9).

The context of this aural scenography is one of the most crucial topics of the play, that is colonialization. The idea of colonialization and the other is rooted in radio drama, as Hand and Traynor add:

Throughout the world's troubled colonial history, radio has often been used as a means of imposing the philosophy of the dominant power on colonized nations. By the mid-1940s, the BBC was broadcasting in 34 languages worldwide (BBC World Service History, 2010), a clear signal that the British government wished to promote its ideologies directly to its colonies in Africa, India and Asia. As well as expanding broadcasts from London, the BBC supported the development of radio stations in the colonies themselves, which improved the dissemination of messages from Britain, but also had clear remit of contributing to the 'betterment' of indigenous populations (82).

The museum is not only a place to be visited by a young couple of different cultures (colonized/colonizer), but the exhibits inside "remain unacknowledged reminders and remainders of the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism; a general collective amnesia ... Scotland has, however, been feeling the pressure to reckon with this unsavoury past and its debilitating legacies, and debates on decolonizing knowledge production in/and institutions (such as universities and museums) are underway" (Arora, 3).

There are multi layers of descriptions within the museum. Each object inside

the museum tells untold narratives: the posters with its engraved descriptions, biographies of explorers, the Scottish man statue surrounded by mischievous objects got from Africa, guns, letters, among many others. These objects not only refer to the politics of the colonizer in defaming the African history, but also deepen Shadia's sense of diaspora and guilt over being there. She leaves the place promptly crying because this is not her Africa. She expects to see photos of the sunset, the minarets, and boats on the River Nile. Shadia's attitude symbolizes the African anger towards such stereotyping and reminds the reader of Chinua Achebe's negative reaction to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Chinua Achebe accused Conrad of adopting racist ideas in his novel by making Africa look inferior to Europe (Crook, 1999:190).

The museum scene is a vivid example of how radio drama is never blind. On the one hand, the word museum itself is very visual. It connotes whatever can be displayed there. Aboulela manages through these descriptive and narrative strategies to convey this visual sense through the eyes of both Shadia and Bryan, adding the effect of sound and light. Moreover, these descriptive and narrative strategies create an interactive relation between Shadia, as a viewer and the objects she sees. The passage does not describe what Shadia only sees, but also what she feels. This what gives a sense of reality to the radio drama, especially that Shadia, to some extent is a symbol of Aboulela and other black Muslim English writers who depict Scotland as a diaspora space in their writings (Arora, 8). On the other hand,

the script adapted for the radio gives the listeners the chance to listen to the other voices, not only the narrator as is the case with the text of the short story. Abouela herself agrees on such a point when asked about the difference between the short story and the radio play. She states that the mood of the play is more light-hearted than the story and that the play has more conversations where characters play multiple roles (Abouela, 2021). For example, Bryan's opposing voice is clearly heard. He sees such imperialists who defame the African history as heroes. In García's words, such a single point of view can be dangerous as it affects many who may be totally misled by the wrong or incomplete information. Hence, other voices should be heard (García, 7).

Being "the other" can be the other way round. For Africans, or the Eastern, in general, the West is the other. Shadia expresses the view that most Eastern countries believe that the West is against Islam. In her turn, Shadia, as a defence mechanism, takes the chance whenever possible to compare herself, her family and her country to Bryan's. She is proud that she speaks better English than Bryan does, and that her mother is from a rich family and her father is a doctor. She even compares Scotland's River Dee to the Blue Nile in Sudan, boasting that the Nile is greater and more magnificent. Shadia's remarks indicate her otherness and prejudice, especially during her conversation with Bryan about Islam, when Bryan shows his readiness to travel to Mecca and even become a Muslim.

The mentioning of Mecca "functions as an alternative landscape, which

encapsulates alternative possibilities for both characters... the text therefore suggests a real opportunity to forge a relationship across boundaries. The imagined trip to Mecca, and all that it would entail for the two characters, is Aboulela's alternative vision to a reality which entraps both characters" (Steiner, 11). In this relation, Bryan always takes the positive initiatives; he helps Shadia by giving her his last year notes, cuts his hair, removes the earring, and learns about Islam to break the ice.

Since there is no scenery in radio drama, the writer depends on 'extended signification', instead. There is an example of this in *The Museum*, in the form of a clock ticking and chiming among scenes as an interval. The sound of the clock is called the semiotic sign or the realistic, evocative effect (Crook 1999, 71). The clock has many dramatic functions. Fundamentally, the clock tells the time and indicates the beginning of a scene with its fading up and the end of another scene by its fading down.

Actually, the time has passed and *The Museum* ends, as it begins, with the clock ticking at the same location — the university cafeteria in Aberdeen where Shadia and Miriam are checking the schedule of their final exams. This gives the radio play the unity of time, place and action required in stage drama. By the same token, *The Sea Warrior* ends also, as it begins, with Nafisa reflecting about Marden whose identity and motives for going to the rig are known by no one — a mystery as he always was.

Nafisa's voice is set against the sounds of the sea gulls hovering in the space, as 'extended signification', adding suspense and gloomy feelings to the scene. The difference between the end of each play is that *The Sea Warrior* ends with Nafisa in Sudan, not Aberdeen. Like Shadia, Nafisa also has her own exam — the journey itself. At the end of her holiday, Nafisa swallowed her pride and told Marya that it was a mistake to miss her wedding. The journey and the wedding had passed, but there was still Nafisa's feeling of guilt, her own guilt and Ed's guilt. Nafisa's guilt is like the grime on the rig. No one can make it go away, like Lady Macbeth's bloody hands that can never turn into white even when washed by the water of the ocean. If Nafisa fails to attend her sister's wedding or to save Marden, she still has her greater dream of her country— Sudan, as she herself releases: "Most of the oil in Sudan is onshore. Once they start actively producing, I'll go back home. It'll be great. We'll pump our own oil and stop being the poorest country in the world" (Aboulela, 2001).

The characters of both Shadia and Nafisa, with their human experiences appeal to the audience because they are social archetypes and the social and political dilemmas facing them are familiar to most listeners. Hence, they can be discussed. Although Shadia and Nafisa share the same experiences abroad, they behave differently. The former seems more confined to the African traditions than the latter. When asked by Bryan to have a cup of tea or go to the museum, Shadia hesitates on the ground that she wouldn't do the same if she were in Sudan. Shadia never

forgets her Eastern culture — religion instructions, Azzan, family, among other things, while Nafisa wouldn't be happy when reminded of her African identity.

This gives radio drama its sense of reality. In her analysis of realism in African radio drama, Dina Ligaga asks how “realism play itself out in the context of African mass media developmental drama? (132). She provides the answer mentioning the elements of realism:

The first is that these texts provide an intensive dose of politics under the guise of everyday life, such focus on the quotidian heightens the effect of realism in such mass media narratives. Another factor promoting realism is the ‘borrowing’ from African popular cultural traditions. Central to these popular formations is didacticism...such didactic forms produce their own forms of realism as readers/listeners are invited to select ‘lessons’ from a text and apply these to their lives (Ligaga,133).

This is what happens at the end of the two plays. Each heroine has her own quest and journey from Sudan to Aberdeen, representing not only themselves, but the African female voice heard in the radio for the first time. By the end of this paper, it can safely be maintained that Aboulela is the first African writer to take the initiatives to provide new topics via new media — the radio, as she herself states:

At the time these plays were broadcast on radio, there was not many plays written by African writers or featuring African characters. I think these plays pushed boundaries in that they were both set in Britain and dealt with educated, qualified Africans as protagonists

navigating life in Britain. Both plays were ahead of their time. In *The Sea Warrior*, the main character Nafisa is a Sudanese, Muslim woman working offshore in a male-dominated oil-rig. At the time, this was very unusual and still is, to some extent. In *The Museum*, the theme of decolonizing museums is tackled head on. This is an important issue, and many European museums are re-evaluating their exhibits (Aboulela, 2021).

Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Museum* and *The Sea Warrior* are two impressive examples of the growing appeal of radio drama. Radio drama can be adapted from other literary genres like *The Museum*, or originally written for the radio as in *The Sea Warrior*. This paper has shown that the former is easier than the latter despite using the same technique. In both cases, they are mediated via the Internet which enhances their development and popularity. The degree of that success is determined by how the two plays are conceived both thematically and structurally. Thematically, Aboulela manages to introduce new radio drama. She captures the listeners' attention from the very beginning to the end by choosing two of the most interesting topics —the unattained romance because of the cultural gaps in *The Museum* and the manipulation of suspense and horror in *The Sea Warrior* caused by the ambiguity of Marden's character who is killed at the end of the play with high sounds of the wind drowning out his screams for help and the sounds of struggle with his killer.

Structurally, the two radio plays manage to convey visuality required in stage drama through four effective ingredients: the careful use of descriptive dialogue, narration, sound effects and few characters. Although these four elements address the sense of hearing in the first place, they work collectively to compensate for the other senses through the power of description. Being word-limited, radio drama uses each word in its proper place not only in description, but in narration as well. Each play has layers of narrative or layers of stories, one of which takes place in 'real time' (that is, the course of the play), during which the main story is partly narrated and also re-enacted. The other story is evoked using flashback technique. Both modes of narration are accompanied by sound effects, essential tools giving reality to radio drama. Radio drama has not the luxury of employing many characters as is the case with stage drama. Being unseen, the character who does not speak is quickly forgotten. Aboulela commands her listeners' attention by employing only four characters in each play at most, while the other characters are visited in flashbacks. No drama, whether radio or stage play, can do so without the role of the audience. This role is more positive in the former than in the latter. In stage drama, the audience can see and judge, while in radio drama s/he depends on imagination to create his/her own world, the world of radio drama.

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