



The Return of the Repressed: Religion in the Fictions of Leila Aboulela and Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye

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There seems to be a resurgence of the kind of genre in the contemporary world where religion, initially thought to be on the wane, is actually reasserting itself in various ways. One of the most conspicuous voices, for example, in contemporary America, is Marilynne Robinson, whose works are followed with keen interest. We however are sceptical that such themes can sustain writers in the long run, and will label them as genre writers. This seems to us as the return of the repressed, in the classical Freudian sense, in the sense that themes that were becoming increasingly repressed in secular societies are finding their way back into the public consciousness through the works of gifted contemporary novelists.

Literature is often a mirror of the period in which a work of art has been created. It is for this reason that we often frame literary texts within the time period that the texts are created. It is this assumption that we neatly categorise within the historical period that they were created. It is for this reason that we describe fictions as say, Victorian, Industrial Revolution, Edwardian, Modernist, and so on. This is particularly true of English literature. Other literary traditions have different ways of categorising literary productions. For example, postcolonial literatures are often categorised on the basis of the trauma of colonialism: pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial. Literatures of the Islamic

Middle East have added categories such as post-Ottoman, pre-revolution, revolutionary, apart from the classical *jahiliyya* and post-*jahiliyya* periods.

An implicit but unspoken assumption in all these categorisations is that at a deep level, these literatures are underpinned by a certain spirituality, be this Christian, Islamic or Hindu. Behind this assumption is the given that the earliest forms of literary production were saturated with the mystery surrounding creation, institution building and the mores of society. These mysteries gave rise to the earliest forms of literature and mythology. Humans created stories to explain to themselves the incomprehensible and these stories at a certain point became the basis of religious beliefs and philosophical speculation. Without these stories, there would neither have been religious belief, philosophy nor science. The unstructured reality began to take shape only when mythology was created. The gods and goddesses that we created ourselves and then began to worship, were a step towards self-realisation. The earliest gods and goddesses had the same flaws as us human beings, they were assailed by the same weaknesses that we found in ourselves, and they became a sure mirror of the human person, with all his/her frailties. Later, the heroes, during the heroic age, again reflected our own wishful thinking.

With the rise of critical philosophy and the scientific method, there was no attempt to abandon the mythic in human history. It was assumed that, although now we started to think in more abstract terms, not everyone was capable of benefitting from this new worldview. It was taken as a given that, in human societies, there will be those among us who will be unable to make the mental leap from the concrete to the abstract, and for this reason, it was necessary to defend mythology as part of human heritage, a part that has its significance in transmitting ethic and moral values from one generation to the next. As such, discussions of such human values as virtue, justice, friendship, could only be transmitted through the silly stories of mythology. This is well articulated by Luc Brisson in *How Philosophers Saved Myths: Allegorical interpretation and Classical Mythology*. This was ol' time religion.

The Bible, the Qur'an and the Vedas brought new kinds of stories, whose underpinning was the construction of new moral orders. The new texts brought in their wake the new religions of Islam and Christianity, but Hinduism, Shintoism and Traditional African and Amerindian religions are still remnants of the primeval spiritual order. There has always been what the British Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks has called the *Persistence of Faith* throughout human history, to the present.

In the Western intellectual tradition, the Renaissance is hailed as a New Era, but in fact, it was no more than an attempt to reclaim through the back door the pagan spirituality deriving from Classical and Late Antiquity. The intellectuals of the period, be they artists, creative writers or philosophers, were weary of the stranglehold of Christianity on all aspects of society, and sought to liberate themselves from this straight-jacket. Other, non-Western, societies did the same by creating a discourse counter to that of the religious. That is how the *Arabian Nights* were born, from ancient India all the way to what is today the Middle East. This was something like a literary carnival, where imagination was allowed to run wild outside the orbit of religion. These were all attempts at circumventing the official discourse dominated by men of religion and sanctioned by the rulers. Contemporary World Literature is incomprehensible without this mythological, spiritual background, because whether we speak of Greek/Roman mythology, African, Hindu or Japanese or Amerindian mythologies, the Holy Scriptures of Christianity, Islam or Hinduism, these are part of the collective unconscious, and form an important part of the inter-textuality necessary to self-referentiality.

Creative writers have for centuries situated themselves within particular spiritual traditions while creating works of art. This is taken for granted in the West. The medieval period in the West is considered collective because all European societies, without a single exception, went through the long experience of Christianity, from the tenth century all the way to the early twentieth century,

with intermission for the Reformation and the Enlightenment. Although writers are situated within particularistic traditions, some, because of their intellectual versatility, have dipped into traditions that are not primarily their own, and claimed them for themselves by taking allusions from those external traditions. For example, Dante borrowed from the story of the Ascension of Prophet Muhammad to Heaven as recounted in the Hadith of the Prophet to construct his *Divine Comedy*. Or, to take a more contemporary figure, in his novel *Spider's House*, Paul Bowles uses the story of the Prophet Muhammad's anecdote about his being protected from his enemies by hiding in a cave on his way into exile in Medina. Spiders form a protective wall with their web which stops his enemies from pursuing him further. Or Salman Rushdie's constant allusions to Hindu mythology in *Midnight's Children*.

This cross-cultural enrichment does not necessarily mean that writers do not situate themselves solidly within their religious traditions. Indeed they do.

The two writers that we have chosen, Leila Aboulela, a Sudanese novelist currently based in Aberdeen, Scotland, and Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye, are examples of novelists who still stick to religion as their default mode of literary exposition. Both use fiction to advance their sectarian viewpoints without being offensive to secularists or the non-religious in general.

Leila Aboulela's spirited spiritual damage control

Leila Aboulela, throughout most of her fictions, novels and short stories, has tried to defend Islam as a spiritual religion, and not a political religion. That she should hold such a position is evident from her own background as a Sudanese. Mystical Islam, with its headquarters at Omdurman, is very much part of the Sudanese landscape. In fact, modern Sudan is dated at the point the Sudanese resisted British colonial encroachment under Lord Gordon Kitchener in the nineteenth century. Led by Muhammad al-Mahdi, Restorer of the Faith, the Sudanese rallied under his mystical brotherhood to push the British out, resulting in the death of Gordon. This millenarianism galvanized the Sudanese into a national consciousness embedded in Islam. Like much of West Africa, society in the Sudan is organised partly around belonging to a brotherhood. The brotherhoods double as communities of self-help and also as spiritual sanctuaries complete with an organisational structure. The main activities of these Sufi brotherhoods are centred on remembering Allah and his ubiquitous presence in the thoughts and actions of individuals.



Image of Leila Aboulela

It is important to stress that Sufi religiosity is based on individual accountability that is ultimately anchored in internal purification as prioritised before the practice of ritual. It tends to de-emphasise the legalistic aspects of the faith, unlike for the Salafis, for example, who give importance to the minutiae of ritual practice. This legalistic emphasis on the part of the Salafis pits them against the purely spiritual emphasis of the mystics.

Leila Aboulela, in her fictions, is at pains to point out that what is done in the name of Islam has nothing to do with Islam, and that those who are prone to violence only do so after they have politicised Islam by demanding, for example, the establishment of an Islamic state, the *Khilafah*, or Islamic Caliphate. Sufi immersion in God-consciousness is considered a form of escapism from the challenging political and economic realities of the Islamic world. On their part, the Sufis accuse the Salafis of sanctimonious ostentatiousness and consider themselves to be the real upholders of the prophetic message of peace and love, without at the same time holding to the highest standards set by the Prophet himself.

On reading Aboulela's fiction, one is left with the impression that she tries to compress the whole Islamic ethos and practice within her short fiction, where readers will not only enjoy the storyline, but at the same time gradually learn what the "real" Islam or Islamic practice is. In reading her fiction, we are taken through all the essential, but simple Islamic practices and beliefs without seeming to be coerced. The message is that Islam is such a practical and simple faith that it cannot be distorted or abused without exposing those who want to put the religion to their own nefarious uses. For example, Dr Nizar Fareed, a Salafi character in *The Translator*, is portrayed as well-intentioned but indoctrinated by rigid Salafi interpretations of the scripture and the practice of the Prophet. He emerges as inflexible, opinionated and self-righteous. He appears as some kind of cardboard character, uncritical and gullible, although kind and intelligent.



Leila Aboulela encapsulates the whole gamut of Islamic practice and belief in that short novel, *The Translator*

Leila Aboulela encapsulates the whole gamut of Islamic practice and belief in that short novel, *The Translator*. For example, she describes the cornerstone of Islamic belief as the absolute surrender to Allah in all one's actions, and believing that He is the one who proposes and disposes of the believers' every action. They are helpless before His immense omnipotence. Although we may plan our actions, we must never lose sight of the fact that everything is preordained, and we should not be overly disappointed when things do not go our way. God consciousness entails our planning for the future, but not being deluded into believing that things will always go the way we have planned. This is the classical *tawheed* position, where, *tawakkul*, or total surrender to the will of God is the pure faith. *Tawheed* and *tawakkul* are the twin pillars on the road to sainthood. The fragility of human life makes it necessary for humans to acknowledge the presence of a force mightier than any human society can command. In fact, Sammar, the main protagonist in *The Translator*, is sustained in her grief by her total surrender to the will of Allah. Her strong faith sees her through unimaginable grief after the loss of her young doctor-husband in a tragic road accident in Aberdeen, Scotland, far from home, where she finds succour and help from absolute strangers whom she only knows through shared faith and belief in Islam. They take over the funeral arrangements, the washing of the body and its transportation to Khartoum for burial, without having known the deceased or the widow. They answer the call of Islam to help one another in a time of need, the true implementation of Islamic teachings. In a poignant scene, Aboulela, using Sammar as her mouthpiece, describes this communal involvement during the arrangements immediately after the death of her husband:

A whole week passed before she got him under the African soil. It had taken that long to arrange everything through the embassy in London: the quarantine, the flight. People helped her, took over. Strangers, women whom she kept calling by the wrong names, filled the flat, cooked for her and each other, watched the ever-wondering child so she could cry. They prayed, recited the Qur'an, spent the night on the couch and on the floor. They did not leave her alone, abandoned. She went between them dazed, thanking them, humbled by the awareness that they were stronger than her, more giving than her, though she thought of herself as more educated, better dressed.

Islamic teachings are inserted in a subtle way at appropriate places to create the desired effect. The Hadith of the Prophet are summarised and included as explanatory tropes to affirm Islamic teachings. For example, all the major issues at the core of Islam like *tawheed*, *qadar*, or predestination, prayers, charity, the apportionment of inheritance to both male and female inheritors, the etiquette of grieving for widows, are highlighted. These issues are introduced seamlessly without appearing as sermonising. As an illustration, Sammar tries to convince Rae, her new-found love, to recite the declaration of the intention to embrace Islam. She notes the simplicity of the creed itself by getting Yasmin, Sammar's friend, to say that the creed has sometimes been abused or taken lightly, as some kind of fig leaf to mask relationships between a Muslim and a non-Muslim:

'I have seen the kind of Scottish men who marry Muslim girls.' Yasmin went on, 'The typical scenario: he is with an oil company sent to Malaysia or Singapore; she is this cute little thing in a mini-skirt who's out with him every night. Come marriage time, it's by the way I'm Muslim and my parents will not let you marry me until you convert. And how do I convert my darling, I love you, I can't live without you? Oh, it's just a few words you have to say. Just say the Shahadah, it's just a few words. *I bear witness there is no god but Allah and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah*. End of story. They get married, and she might as the years go by pray and fast or she might not, but it has nothing to do with him. Everything in his life is just the same as it was before.'

On *Tawakkul* and destiny, Aboulela is also discreet in her explanation:

Her fate was etched out by a law that gave her a British passport, a point in time when the demand for people to translate Arabic into English was bigger than the supply. 'No,' she reminded herself, 'that is not the real truth. My fate is etched out by Allah Almighty, if and who I will marry, what I eat, the work I find, my health, the day I will die are as He alone wants them to be.' To think otherwise was to slip down, to feel the world narrowing, dreary and tight.

Further on in the novel, Sammar ascribes her steadfastness and hope to spiritual underpinnings. Her spirituality acts as a shield that protects her from hopelessness and resignation: "She had been protected from all the extremes. Pills, break-down, attempts at suicide. A barrier was put between her and things like that, the balance that Rae [her love] admired".

Leila Aboulela compares the real rational position of Islam, based on transcendence and the rationalism of the empiricist and positivists of the eighteenth/nineteenth centuries. In the words of Rae, who hovers between positivism and doubt,

'In this society,' he said, 'in this secular society, the speculation is that God is out playing golf. With exceptions and apart from those who are self-convinced atheists, the speculation is that God has put up this elaborate solar system and left it to run itself. It does not need Him to maintain it or sustain it in any way. Mankind is self-sufficient . . . '

The rational and plausible Islamic belief system is validated by the, until then, non-Muslim Rae. Having read Islamic religious and other literature, he is gradually won over by this rationality. But he validates Islamic tenets through a third party, Rae's uncle who "went native" or in Tudor parlance, "turned Turk". He quotes from Uncle David's epistolary confession:

David never of course said that Islam was "better" than Christianity. He didn't use that word. Instead he said things like it was a step on, in the way that Christianity followed Judaism. He said that the Prophet Muhammad was the last in a line of prophets that stretched from Adam, to Abraham through Moses and Jesus. They were all Muslims, Jesus was a Muslim, in a sense that

he surrendered to God. This did not go down very well in the letter nor in the essay.

Leila Aboulela takes the opportunity in her fiction to also explain how the Sacred Hadith, or what are better known as *Hadith Qudsi*, the second most important source of authority after the Qur'an, came about, while dictating to Rae, who gave her the assignment:

She sat on the floor of the landing and read out, over the phone, the notes she had made from the book. 'A definition given by the scholar al-Jurjani, "A Sacred Hadith is, as to its meaning, from Allah Almighty; as to the wording, it is from the Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him. It is that which Allah almighty has communicated to His Prophet through revelation or in dream and he, peace be upon him, has communicated it in his own words. Thus the Qur'an is superior to it because, besides being revealed, it is Allah's wording." In a definition given by a later scholar al-Qari, ". . . Unlike the Holy Qur'an, Sacred Hadith are not acceptable for recitation in one's prayers, they are not forbidden to be touched or read by one who is in a state of ritual impurity . . . and they are not characterized by the attribute of immutability".

This is heavy stuff for the uninitiated, and requires extra work to understand this background, even for an average educated Muslim, let alone one who is completely unfamiliar with the Islamic intellectual tradition. This is the kind of intertextuality that is not easily accessible for western readers who mostly read texts from the Western intellectual tradition, and whose allusions are generally familiar. Postcolonial writers now demand that Western readers also exert themselves in order to benefit fully from their reading, just as non-Western readers have to immerse themselves in the Western intellectual tradition to fully enjoy literature emanating from the West. In a recent collection of essays, *Can Non-Europeans Think?* the Columbia University Iranian American scholar Hamid Dabashi decried the provincialism of Western intellectuals. He argues that rarely do Western intellectuals bother to educate themselves about the intellectual traditions of the "others", although they will not shy away from making uninformed pronouncements about those societies that they know little about. He gave the example of Slavoj Zizek, who knows a lot about Marxism and the Western Intellectual tradition, but next to nothing about the Eastern ones. In his view, there is a lot of navel-gazing among them, unable to appreciate other traditions unless they are themselves area specialists churning out papers for policy think tanks, and regurgitating the same orientalist pieties.

Leila Aboulela assumes herself a conscientious and responsible Muslim, whose obligation it is to portray what she believes is the real image of Islam, untainted by its association with the Islamic lunatic fringe hell-bent on wreaking global terror, without any sectarian differentiation. It is through literature that she feels she can best serve her faith. She is conscious of the fact that as a liberal Muslim, she is under constant pressure, like all liberal Muslims to condemn acts of violence perpetrated in their name by their co-religionists. In a column in the British [Guardian](#) entitled *Why Must Britain's Young Muslims Live With Unjust Suspicion?* she described the double jeopardy of these liberals:

The causes and solutions can be hotly debated but it makes little difference to the daily life of Muslims. Until this climate [of fear and suspicion] eases, the day-to-day anxiety, the feeling of being tainted, of being tested, will still be the same. Ironically, it is the liberal integrated Muslims who bear the brunt. On them lies the responsibility of explaining and apologising. If you live in the kind of ghetto where you never read newspapers, never make friends with non-Muslims, never participate in sports, you can feel safe and oblivious. Start to engage and you will immediately realise just how careful you need to be. Young British Muslims are being watched. This is not paranoia. This is just how things are after 9/11 and 7/7.

From the above it is clear that Leila Aboulela took it as her mission to explicate the tenets of Islam to a wider public as a contribution to mutual understanding between Muslims and people of other

faiths and other worldviews. A hard sell this, the defence of Islamic values under the present climate of fear and suspicion. One may also wonder how much mileage she can extract from mining this theme, even under these trying circumstances.

Unlike in the fiction of other writers of Islamic faith, where Islam merely forms the background, as in Nuruddin Farah's later fictions *The Closed Sesame and Crossbones*, and Naguib Mahfouz's *Cairo Trilogy*, Leila Aboulela is deliberate in foregrounding Islamic belief system and practice. It is as if she was an author with an agenda, which she turns out to be in this particular fiction. In this regard, her creative work has more affinity with that of Marilynne Robinson who puts her creative energies to wearing her religion on her sleeve, as does Aboulela in *The Translator*.

The Christian fiction of Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye

Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye, who died in December 2015, is a Kenyan novelist of British descent and a lay Protestant missionary. She came to Kenya in 1954 to work for the Church Missionary Society, fell in love with the country and in 1960 married Dr. Daniel Oludhe Macgoye, a local doctor from the Luo tribe, one of the largest ethnic groups in the country, with whom she had four children. Over the years, she took all the necessary steps to become fully integrated into Kenyan society, and especially completely within the Luo culture; she learned the language to complete spoken and written fluency and accepted almost all aspects of Luo tradition, except those she deemed inimical to Christian values and virtues.

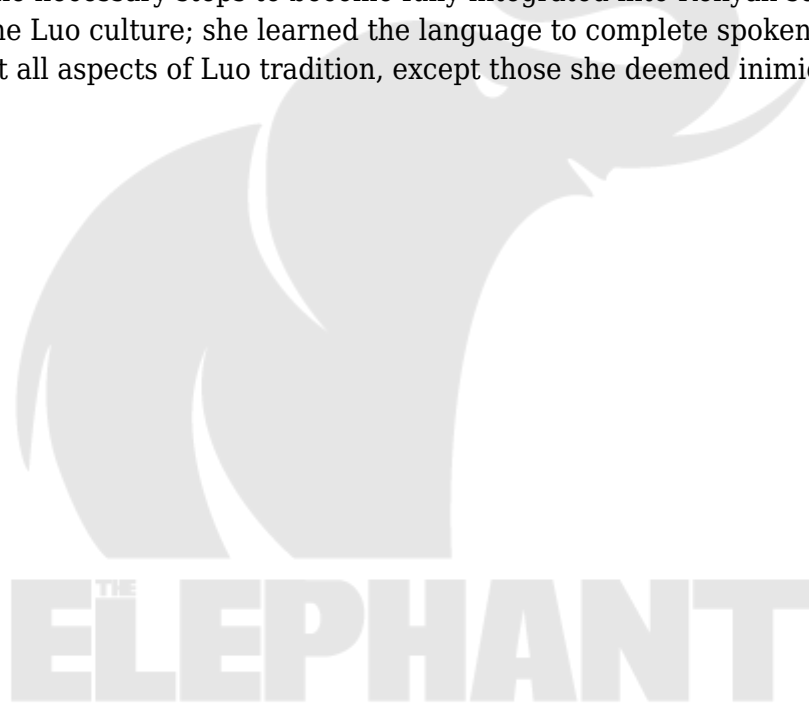




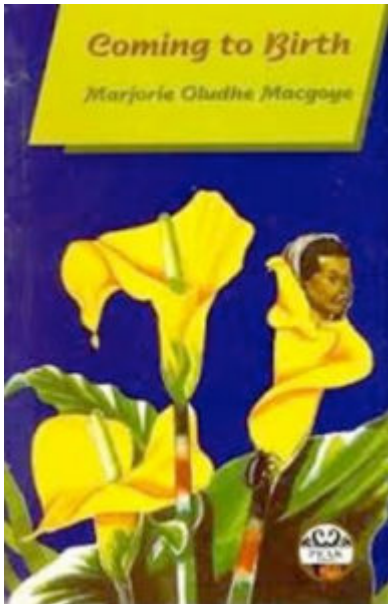
Image of Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye

Macgoye is a well-informed and conscientious novelist, having graduated with a degree in English literature from the Royal Holloway College, University of London, and later earned a Masters from Birkbeck College, University of London. Her grasp of Kenyan political history, and the social changes that she has witnessed personally throughout her extended stay in Kenya, put her in the same intellectual league as the most famous Kenyan novelist, Ngugi wa Thiong'o. In fact, Macgoye's fiction covers the same terrain as that of Ngugi because they seem to have lived almost the same experiences of colonialism and post-colonialism, and their works are a mirror of contemporary history through their neo-realism.

Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye arrived in the country when she was barely in her mid-twenties, and lived the next sixty years mostly in Kenya, with a short interlude in Tanzania as the bookshop manager at the University of Dar es Salaam. During her long residence in Kenya, she witnessed almost all the major political events that shaped the nation: the Mau Mau insurgency, independence, the struggle to create a unified nation out of a welter of ethnicities, tribes, religions and political ideologies. As acute observers of the Kenyan political scene, both Ngugi and Macgoye write proletarian fictions populated by perplexed and dislocated rural masses and the lumpen proletariat who have washed up

in the urban areas because of colonialism and post-independence mass migration.

Macgoye's fiction is populated mostly by female characters, strong women who struggle against all odds. They are mostly uneducated but pick up street smarts as they go through life's trajectory. Female characters like Paulina and Amina are portrayed as strong characters, Amina with her strong entrepreneurial spirit, and Paulina gradually asserting her individuality in the face of constricting tradition.



The main theme in Macgoye's best known fiction, *Coming to Birth*, is the interrogation of anachronistic obsolescent cultural traditions

Perhaps the main theme in Macgoye's best known fiction, *Coming to Birth*, is the interrogation of anachronistic obsolescent cultural traditions. In fact, it appears that in the case of this particular novel, many aspects of Luo culture are held up to be antithetical to all that Christianity stands for. The novel critiques such time-honoured cultural practices as polygamy, levirate marriages, lavish and extravagant wake and funeral practices and the cultural sanctioning of domestic violence in the form of wife beating.

Although the Luo as an ethnic group is considered overwhelmingly Christian, this Christianity is more a veneer than actual substance. The Luo are portrayed as stuck in the cultural past more than many other ethnic and cultural groups. The Luo are held up and judged by the highest Christian practices and standards, and are ultimately found wanting. But in the tribal world of the Luo, cultural practices were considered more humane than the dictates or demands of Christianity. We see, for example, Paulina, the main protagonist in the novel, going through miscarriages, the harassment of being a childless woman in a society that believes in the strength of numbers, the grief of losing a child obtained outside the matrimonial bed, and the state of limbo that the husband keeps her in because, in Luo culture, once a woman is married, she is married for ever as her husband has a permanent claim on her, however cold the relationship throughout their lives. The husband is never sanctioned for shunning her, physically molesting her and completely neglecting her. Christian values are merely paid lip service. In fact, there is general apathy, if not outright cynicism, towards Christianity among the majority. Martin's alienation from Christian practice is

held up as the general religious malaise afflicting the new generations of post-independence Africans. The narrator notes of Martin that:

He did not regularly go to church any more, though he might go if there was a special speaker or if he felt particularly at odds with Paulina's having sometimes to work on a Sunday. The climate had changed from the days when you used to say, 'I am a Christian but I am not yet saved.' To praise the Lord no longer helped you to get a job, and though the top people attended places of worship in surprising numbers they were eager for a quick getaway. It was another way in which light was going out. People talked about religion on buses, in queues, in cafes you heard them talking, but often as though it was something dull, outside themselves.

The celebratory ambience in Luo mourning practices is brought into sharp relief by Macgoye. By letting a comment slip off the mouth of a Kikuyu, a people who are noted for their industriousness in wealth accumulation, the macabre Luo enthusiasm for partying on such occasions is described with a pithy comment from a shopkeeper. In the words of the narrator:

Kano had kept the old hedged homesteads more exactly than the other locations, and also a bigger share of the old plumed headdresses: teams of male dancers bedecked with feathers and bells and intricate chalk patterns were often to be seen going off to the funerals and other public occasions like the Kisumu Festival. Okeyo used to get excited, chattering and pointing till she restrained him, so that the kikuyu shopkeeper remarked somberly, 'He is a real Luo: more keen on a funeral than anything else'.

Okeyo was the child that Paulina had begotten outside her marriage with Simeon, a clansman of Martin's, and who was fatefully killed by a stray bullet during the funeral procession of the legendary Kenyan politician, assassinated in broad day light, in one of Nairobi's busiest streets, on a July day in 1969.

As a counterfoil to Christianity and Christians, Islam and Muslims are portrayed in a less than flattering light through the characters of Amina and Fauzia; as either whores or parents pimping for their own children for survival and livelihood. Both Amina and Fauzia are held responsible for the loosening ties between the rural import, Paulina and her urbanised Martin. Both Amina and Fauzia come out, not only as femmes fatales, but also as some kind of mercenaries out to fleece Martin and lure him to the temptation of sin in the form of nice food, nice dresses and perfumes. Pauline was later to see with her own eyes what Nikos Kazantzakis described these nubile nymphs as: "This labyrinth of hesitation, this poison that tastes like honey...". Pauline wanted to find out for herself what life for Martin was like in Amina's grip:

Amina proved unexpectedly expert with powder and feeding bottle and soon afterwards approached the pastor about baptism for the child but bowed to the rule that since there was no Christian parent, Joyce must make her own profession when she could read and write. The baby made a good pretext for Pauline to come and see Amina from time to time. Little by little she built up a picture of a world quite remote from her own, a world of gay wrappers and jingling bracelets and perfumes and spicy dishes, where slim men with bony features came and went, for what purpose one was not quite aware, and of town houses where these urbane traditions from the coast somehow collected themselves despite the bare crumbling walls and the outlandish cold . . .

Swahili culture is taken as a synecdoche for Islam and all that it stands for, what are perceived as its negative influences among the relatively recent native converts to Christianity. Fauzia was later to be warned of the possibility that he, Martin, might take another wife, but of a different kind:

And so he told her that when he took a second wife she must be a Christian who would leave her hair unplaited and her ears without ornament, who would dig in the fields and plaster walls and leave her children fat and naked. But she only laughed and said she must enjoy herself a while longer.

Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye seems to believe her duty is not to be even-handed when she has to confront the reality that Islam is a major religion and a rival to Christianity in Kenya. In this regard, she takes the opportunity to show what she considers the superiority of Christianity over Islam. She uses her fiction to re-affirm her own faith and its tenuous hold on the relatively new converts on the African continent. Her last work of fiction, *Rebmann*, is a celebration of the efforts of pioneer missionaries like Rebmann and Krapf, who ventured into Africa in the middle of the nineteenth century to win the flock for Jesus Christ in what was then unexplored terrain in the heart of Africa, or the Conradian Heart of Darkness, as Africa was perceived then. Macgoye was later to come to Kenya under the auspices of the same organisation that sponsored the German missionary, the Church Missionary Society.

Looking at name use in her *Coming to Birth*, there is a lingering feeling that Macgoye's ancestors, probably Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe who migrated to England from continental Europe to escape pogroms there, might have converted to the Anglican Christian rite upon their settlement. Female characters are given common scriptural names pointing to Old Testament antecedents, names like Paulina, Rebecca, and Rachel, names popular with people of Jewish background. Again, one of her more obscure fictions set in Kenya is [*A Farm Called Kishinev*](#), described as "a fairly comprehensive picture of Kenyan Jewish experience".

Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye's working class background and sympathies enable her to empathise with the plight of the African poor and downtrodden. Her descriptions of the African "great unwashed" is accurate in that it is described as a life of ceaseless want and deprivation. Nairobi is notorious for its "parking boys", an expression that is a euphemism for abandoned and homeless kids, who are often orphaned and use their street-smarts to survive in a highly competitive and unforgiving environment. Their situation is so dire that they have to live off dustbins, and sometimes resort to using human waste as a weapon to extort money from passers-by threatening to smear them with it if they do not respond generously. The tough struggle for survival is described with pathos, in the words of one such street urchin:

So my dad said we couldn't go on to school for a while because he need all his money to get another woman to look after us. And when he was there she was alright to us, but she started going queer when she got her own baby: then she hated the sight of us and used to beat us for every little thing. And then last year she started saying that she didn't get married to come and live in a back-of beyond village with a load of kids, and not any rice or hair oil or nice soap like her friends had for their babies, and only seeing her man one day or two in the month, and then she started to drink. And then she didn't cook everyday, and never early in the morning, and started saying it was our fault that my dad didn't pay her attention. He only wanted his first wife's children and all that. In the end my little brother got so hurt he ran off to his granny: she doesn't have much, but she likes him and tells him stories. But my sister had to stay to look after the baby, so my dad said. But me, she said I didn't do anything around the place but eat, and so one day when she beat me worse than usual I ran to my friend's big brother who is a conductor on a country bus, and he talked with his dad and put some ointment on the bad places and gave me a ride on the bus free. That was about two months ago.

'He didn't know anything,' put in Muhammad Ali. 'Lucky for him I found him wondering about. I showed him the temples, where they give you free food if there is celebration going on. And how to find the eating places, where good food sometimes gets thrown out when they close, and

how- well, all sorts of things I showed him. He just didn't know how to stay alive'.

Macgoye captures the spirit of anxiety and desperation among those living on the edge.

Both Leila Aboulaela and Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye have used the art of fiction to push their religious agenda, using fiction to both affirm and defend their belief systems in a world that had increasingly come to see religion as dragging us to the medieval bloodletting that so characterised that period. But of late, there has been an upsurge in writers who have unashamedly proclaimed their fidelity to the time-honoured beliefs of their societies and the era in which they are living. This is also an era when we see the rise of militant atheism too, that is challenging the religious discourse and looking for a much wider space than they have ever been accorded. The problem with this kind of genre, where fiction is put at the service of religious sectarianism, is that it soon becomes tiresome in its self-righteousness and tiresome for the secular-minded; these are often people who are also set in their ways of thinking, determined to draw a line between the religious and public space.

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