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Migration as an Intensifier of Assimilative and Retentive Dispositions in Leila Aboulela's "Missing Out"

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Abstract

This article examines Leila Aboulela's "Missing Out" as a literary exploration of migration, assimilation and cultural retention. It argues that the story represents migration not as a sudden transformation of identity, but as an intensifying condition that magnifies dispositions already present before displacement. Majdy's pre-migratory orientation towards academic mobility, Western institutional order and his emotional distance from Sudanese collective life hardens in London into an intensified assimilative logic marked by cultural rejection and disidentification from his origins. By contrast, Samra's embeddedness in communal experience and the rhythms of Sudanese social life becomes, after migration, a rigid form of cultural retention paralysed by nostalgia and psychological stasis. Drawing on John Berry's acculturation theory, as well as Stuart Hall's and Avtar Brah's accounts of identity, diaspora and belonging, the article shows that Aboulela does not simply oppose assimilation to cultural retention, but reveals the limitations of both when they become absolute. Majdy gains mobility but loses rootedness while Samra preserves cultural memory but loses the capacity for adaptation. The article, therefore, proposes anchored integration as a possible third position between self-erasing assimilation and immobilising cultural retention.

1. Introduction

Leila Aboulela's "Missing Out" presents migration less as a transformative rupture than as an intensifying condition that exposes dispositions already latent within the migrant subject. The story does not merely contrast Sudan and Britain, nor does it simply oppose tradition and modernity. Rather, it dramatises how migration intensifies pre-existing dispositions. Majdy and Samra do not become different people only after moving to London. Before migration, Majdy is already oriented toward Western modernity, external validation, personal mobility and distance from Sudanese collective life. Samra, by contrast, is already oriented towards emotional embeddedness in social experience and attachment to communal rhythms.

The move to London functions as a crucible in which these pre-migratory tendencies are tested, intensified and pushed toward more extreme forms. Majdy's earlier detachment from Sudanese social and political life becomes open cultural rejection. Samra's earlier rootedness in Sudanese communal life becomes nostalgic immobilisation. Migration, therefore, does not produce assimilation and cultural retention out of nothing. It intensifies assimilative and retentive dispositions already present in the characters' pre-migratory identities.

This article argues that "Missing Out" represents migration as an intensifying condition. Through Majdy and Samra, Aboulela shows that the migrant experience amplifies prior orientations toward selfhood, culture, time and belonging. Yet the story also demonstrates the limits of both intensified assimilation and rigid retention. Majdy gains mobility but loses rootedness while Samra preserves rootedness but forfeits mobility. Both characters are left, in different ways, "missing out."

The article draws on acculturation and diaspora theory while adapting their categories to literary analysis. John Berry's (1997) model of acculturation is useful because it distinguishes between assimilation, separation and integration according to the migrant's relation to the host society and to the culture of origin. Later developments in acculturation research have further complicated this model by showing that migrant adaptation is not a simple choice between origin and host culture, but a multidimensional process involving cultural practices, values, identifications and changing ecological conditions (Berry et al., 2006; Schwartz et al., 2010; Ward & Geeraert, 2016). However, Aboulela's story does not present these orientations as fixed sociological choices. It dramatises them as dispositions that precede migration but become intensified through displacement. While Berry provides a useful typology for distinguishing between different acculturative orientations, Hall offers a more dynamic model of identity as a process shaped by both continuity and transformation. Stuart Hall's (1990) account of cultural identity as shaped by both continuity and becoming is, therefore, central to this reading. Majdy and Samra ultimately "miss out" not simply because one turns towards Britain and the other towards Sudan, but because each absolutises one dimension of migrant identity. Majdy pursues becoming without sufficient continuity, and Samra preserves continuity without adequate adaptation.

2. Migration, Disposition and Intensification

The central conflict in "Missing Out" can be understood through two cultural dispositions: the assimilative disposition and the retentive disposition. An assimilative disposition refers to a tendency to seek belonging by internalising the values, norms, mores and symbolic authority of the dominant host culture while progressively distancing oneself from the culture of origin (Berry, 1997). It is not merely a practical adjustment to a new environment. It becomes a deeper psychological orientation towards external models of success, recognition and legitimacy.

A retentive disposition, by contrast, refers to a tendency to preserve inherited cultural forms, emotional attachments and communal rhythms. It values continuity, memory and rootedness. Like assimilation, retention is not inherently negative. It may provide stability, dignity and identity in the face of displacement. However, when intensified by migration, retention may become rigid, nostalgic and resistant to present adaptation.

Aboulela's story does not treat assimilation and retention as abstract sociological categories. It incarnates them in two characters whose personalities, choices and imaginations already reveal contrasting orientations before migration takes place. Majdy and Samra do not merely respond differently to London. They arrive in London with different mental and cultural structures. Migration magnifies what they already are.

3. Majdy before Migration: The Assimilative Disposition

Majdy's assimilative disposition is already visible before he leaves Sudan. His academic trajectory reveals an outward orientation. He is repeatedly described as pursuing grants for postgraduate research, especially opportunities that would allow him to continue his studies abroad. The repeated pursuit implied by "always chasing" suggests that Majdy's relationship to foreign academic opportunity is not casual but compulsive. The grant becomes a symbolic object through which he seeks mobility, legitimacy and escape. This detail is significant because it shows that Majdy's imagination of success is already tied to external academic systems. His ambition depends on movement away from Sudan and toward institutions that he associates with achievement, recognition and advancement.

This does not mean that Majdy is wrong to seek academic progress. The story does not condemn ambition. What it reveals, however, is that his ambition is structured through distance. He does not imagine fulfilment through participation in local collective life. His future lies elsewhere before he physically departs. In this sense, London does not create his assimilative desire. Rather, it gives it a concrete destination.

Majdy's disengagement from political struggle further confirms this disposition. During the student demonstrations in Sudan, he observes and does not participate. He does not share the demonstrators'

anger, excitement or sense of collective purpose. He regards the protest as futile, and he is emotionally detached from the atmosphere of rebellion. While other students experience the demonstration as a shared political and social moment, Majdy stands outside it.

This detachment is crucial. It shows that Majdy's distance from Sudan is not just geographical or institutional. It is emotional and ideological. He does not feel himself part of the collective body. His response to political struggle is not commitment but scepticism. He is already positioned as an individual observer rather than a participant in communal action. Majdy's marriage to Samra, also, reveals his practical and instrumental approach to life. The relationship is not presented as a passionate romantic union. The narrator explicitly states that there has been "no sudden meeting between them, no adolescent romance." Instead, Samra's value for Majdy is expressed in practical and domestic terms: "Marrying Samra had helped him feel settled and comfortable, well fed and looked after." Marriage becomes part of a structure that supports his personal stability and future plans. Samra is valued insofar as she contributes to his sense of domestic order. This utilitarian dimension foreshadows the later breakdown of the marriage once Samra's retentive orientation no longer supports Majdy's assimilative project.

Majdy's pre-migratory identity is therefore already marked by an assimilative logic. He seeks upward movement, external validation, individual advancement and distance from local disorder. Migration does not invent these tendencies. It will intensify them.

4. Samra before Migration: The Retentive Disposition

Samra's pre-migratory positioning is sharply different. She is emotionally, socially and culturally embedded in her environment. Her presence during the student demonstrations reveals an orientation towards participation rather than detachment. She runs through tear gas with her friend, crying and laughing at the same time. This detail is highly expressive. Samra experiences life in its fullness: pain and joy, danger and excitement, fear and vitality. Unlike Majdy, she does not stand outside collective experience. She is immersed in it.

Her laughter through pain suggests that her relation to life is not governed by calculation or detached analysis. She is affectively involved. She belongs to a social atmosphere, not simply to a geographical place. The demonstration becomes a sign of her embeddedness in collective life. She is part of a community that feels, reacts and moves together.

This scene also contrasts sharply with Majdy's position. While the students are demonstrating against political injustice, Majdy is searching for a professor in order to obtain a reference letter for one of the postgraduate grants he is pursuing. The contrast is significant: Samra is located within the movement of collective life, while Majdy is oriented toward individual academic mobility and departure. Her pre-migratory disposition is therefore not simply "traditional" in an abstract sense; it is socially participatory, affective and communal.

Samra's retentive disposition therefore precedes migration. She is oriented toward continuity, return, cultural intimacy and communal belonging. London will not create this attachment; it will intensify it into a more painful and immobilising form.

5. London as a Crucible of Intensification

London is the decisive space of intensification in "Missing Out." It does not simply function as a new setting. It becomes the environment in which Majdy's and Samra's pre-existing dispositions are tested, sharpened and polarised. The move from Sudan to Britain exposes the incompatibility between their models of life.

For Majdy, London confirms the worldview he already desired. He sees in Britain the order, reliability and institutional continuity that he believes Sudan lacks. Everyday systems become signs of civilisation. Rain falls and people continue with umbrellas. Supermarket shelves empty and fill again. The postman delivers the mail every day. These details are mundane, yet for Majdy they carry symbolic force. They represent a world that functions. His admiration extends to public services and technological systems. Ambulances and fire engines are dependable. Banking machines produce money through smooth mechanical efficiency. London appears to him as a space where life can be built because the surrounding system is stable. In this sense, his fascination with London is anchored in its systemic reliability.

Yet, this admiration quickly becomes hierarchical. London becomes associated with civilisation, decency, order and progress while Sudan becomes associated with delay, futility, political disorder and backwardness. Majdy's earlier detachment from Sudan turns into explicit condemnation. He rejects the political atmosphere he associates with Sudanese intellectuals, coups, laws, strikes, petrol queues and

institutional dysfunction. This culminates in his bleak judgment saying that "We are centuries behind, he would tell her later, in things like that we are too far behind ever to catch up." This marks the intensification of his assimilative disposition. Before migration, Majdy was emotionally distant from Sudanese collective life. In London, that distance becomes contempt. He no longer merely wants to move forward. He wants to detach himself from what he sees as the burden of Sudanese identity. His assimilation becomes rejection of origin.

Samra's experience of London follows the opposite movement. London intensifies her attachment to Sudan. The more Majdy idealises British order, the more Samra retreats into memory, longing and imagined return. Her Sudanese world becomes more emotionally charged precisely because it is absent. The rhythms of home acquire symbolic power in exile. Brah's (1996) concept of "homing desire" helps clarify the divergent migrant orientations of Majdy and Samra. For Brah, the desire for home is a deeper longing for belonging, security, familiarity and existential rootedness. In "Missing Out," Samra attaches this homing desire to Khartoum, which she imagines as a space of communal intimacy, cultural continuity and emotional flourishing. Majdy, by contrast, attaches his homing desire to London, which he associates with order, reliability, professional possibility and the chance to build a meaningful future. Their conflict is not simply between homeland and hostland, but between two competing constructions of where "home" can be located.

This conflict can also be read through more recent theories of belonging. Yuval-Davis (2006) distinguishes belonging from the politics of belonging, showing that belonging involves not only emotional attachment but also social location, identification and the boundaries through which communities define who is included or excluded. This distinction is important for "Missing Out" because Majdy and Samra are not merely choosing between two places. They are negotiating different regimes of belonging. London offers Majdy institutional order and professional possibility, but it does not automatically grant him affective or historical rootedness. Sudan offers Samra memory, intimacy and communal recognition, but in London these attachments become increasingly paralysing. Assa's (2024) recent reading of Aboulela's "Missing Out" similarly emphasises the story's concern with displaced belonging and the ways migrant subjects navigate competing political and emotional landscapes of home.

When Majdy begins to imagine staying in Britain permanently, Samra responds by imagining a return to Sudan. Her ideal future is built around afternoon sleep under the fan, children playing on the roof, mint tea, neighbours, gossip and collective mourning. Samra's post-migratory fantasy shows how London intensifies her attachment to Sudanese communal rhythms until they become the imaginative centre of her desired future. When she imagines the future, she does not imagine permanent settlement in London or individual professional advancement. She imagines return. Her ideal life is built around familiar domestic and communal rhythms: Majdy coming home early, afternoon sleep under the fan, children playing on the roof, mint tea, neighbours visiting and bringing gossip. This imagined world is not organised around productivity but around intimacy, repetition and shared presence.

Samra's ideal life is communal and rhythmic. Time is not clock time, career time or institutional time. It is natural and experiential. The day is structured by heat, sunset, rest, conversation and neighbourhood life. Her description of the sun's departure suggests an understanding of time tied to nature rather than modern efficiency. Life unfolds according to atmosphere and relation rather than deadlines and measurable achievements.

Even emotion, in Samra's worldview, is communal. When someone dies, she imagines grabbing her tobe and running to mourn with others. Grief is not privately contained. It is publicly shared. This reveals a social world in which the self is not isolated from the community. Identity is lived through participation in collective rhythms of joy, grief, conversation and care.

Samra's intensified cultural retention transforms into paralysis. Her mode of life in Sudan, initially presented as vitality and rootedness, becomes increasingly static in London. Longing does not help her adapt. It suspends her between the place she inhabits and the place she nostalgically reconstructs. She becomes "stuck in the past," and this psychological immobilisation is made physically visible when Majdy comes home and finds her "sitting, just sitting." Therefore, London polarises the couple. It turns Majdy's assimilative disposition into cultural rejection and Samra's retentive disposition into nostalgic immobilisation. The city functions as a pressure chamber, revealing the limits of both orientations.

6. Majdy's Intensified Assimilation and the Problem of Belonging

Majdy's intensified assimilation is built on a real perception. Britain does offer forms of order and institutional reliability that he values. Aboulela does not simply ridicule his admiration for London. The story allows the reader to understand why such a space appeals to him. A society in which services function, systems continue and daily life is predictable can indeed feel like a condition for self-realisation.

The problem lies in the absolutisation of this perception. Majdy turns functional admiration into civilisational hierarchy. He begins to read efficiency as moral superiority and dysfunction as cultural inferiority. His language reveals not only preference but shame. He does not want to be associated with visible signs of cultural or religious difference because he fears that they will connect him to "fanatics and backwardness." Assimilation becomes self-erasure.

This is where Majdy's model begins to fail. He assumes that distancing himself from Sudan will allow him to belong fully to London. Yet London contains something that cannot become his. He can live there, work there and benefit from its systems, but he cannot fully inherit its historical belonging. He can admire its order, but admiration is not the same as rootedness. Majdy's assimilation produces liminality. He is no longer at home in Sudan, nor is he fully at home in Britain. He has moved physically and professionally, but his belonging remains incomplete. Migration has intensified his desire for assimilation, but that desire cannot give him the wholeness he seeks.

The tragedy of Majdy's position is that he sacrifices rootedness for mobility. He gains access to a world of order and possibility, but he loses connection to the social and cultural world that could have grounded him. He becomes oriented toward a future that remains partially inaccessible because it requires a form of belonging that cannot simply be achieved through work, admiration or residence.

7. Samra's Intensified Retention and the Problem of Stasis

Samra's intensified retention also begins from something valuable. Her attachment to Sudanese life preserves forms of meaning that Majdy dismisses too quickly – namely, community, shared emotion, natural time, intimacy and continuity. Her vision of life challenges the reduction of existence to productivity and achievement. In this sense, Samra's worldview contains a critique of the modern, efficiency-driven model that Majdy embraces.

However, the story also reveals the limits of her position. In London, Samra's retention becomes less a source of strength than a form of withdrawal. Her imagined Sudanese world remains emotionally powerful, but it does not help her construct a meaningful life in the present. Instead of becoming a portable cultural resource, memory becomes a fixed refuge. This produces stasis. The woman who once ran through tear gas, laughed through pain and moved enthusiastically through Khartoum becomes motionless, spending the whole day "sitting, just sitting." This image is central to the failure of rigid cultural retention. Samra's rootedness, once associated with vitality, becomes immobilisation. She is attached to a world that is absent, and this attachment prevents her from inhabiting the world that is present.

Samra sacrifices mobility for continuity. She preserves cultural memory, but she cannot transform that memory into adaptive life. Her cultural retention becomes a refusal or inability to negotiate the new environment. The result is not wholeness but alienation. Aboulela's treatment of Samra is therefore nuanced. The story does not mock her longing or dismiss her attachment to Sudan. It recognises the emotional legitimacy of her desire for return. But it also shows that memory alone cannot sustain migrant existence if it becomes detached from present action.

8. The Marital Conflict as a Conflict of Temporalities

Majdy and Samra's disagreement does not merely concern space, but it extends to time. Majdy is future-oriented. His life is structured by academic progression, career, achievement and the desire to build something in London. Time, for him, is linear and developmental. It moves forward toward success.

Samra is continuity-oriented. Her imagination returns to familiar rhythms and cyclical patterns: afternoon sleep, tea, neighbours, gossip, children, sunset and mourning. Time, for her, is not primarily a ladder of achievement but a rhythm of belonging. It repeats, returns and connects. Migration intensifies this temporal conflict. London strengthens Majdy's linear model because it appears to provide the institutional security necessary for progress. At the same time, London intensifies Samra's cyclical model because the absence of home makes the remembered rhythms of Sudan more precious. Each character becomes more attached to a different experience of time.

This temporal opposition explains why they cannot easily understand each other. When Samra describes her ideal life, Majdy dismisses it as hallucination and waste of time. He cannot see the value of a life

organised around communal presence rather than productivity. Conversely, Samra cannot share Majdy's belief that security, efficiency and professional advancement are sufficient conditions for fulfilment. Their conflict is, therefore, not simply cultural. It is existential. They inhabit different conceptions of what a meaningful life is.

9. Gendered Dispositions and Unequal Migrant Possibilities

A further dimension of this conflict concerns gender. Majdy and Samra are not merely symmetrical embodiments of assimilation and retention. Their dispositions are also mediated by differently gendered possibilities. Majdy's desired world is organised around academic progress, professional recognition, institutional order and public achievement, all conventionally coded as masculine forms of migrant mobility. Samra's imagined world, by contrast, is structured around children, neighbours, tea, domestic rhythm and communal care, all conventionally associated with feminine sociality. Aboulela, however, does not simply naturalise this opposition by presenting assimilation as masculine and retention as feminine. Rather, she exposes how migration can intensify gendered expectations themselves. Majdy's mobility is enabled by academic and institutional structures, whereas Samra's options in London are more restricted, domestic and dependent. Her failure to adapt is, therefore, not only a matter of extreme nostalgia or cultural rigidity. It is also shaped by the narrower forms of agency available to her as a migrant wife. In this sense, Samra may "miss out" partly because the world she inhabits offers her fewer routes into meaningful participation than it offers Majdy. This gendered asymmetry complicates, without overturning, the article's central argument. Migration still intensifies pre-existing dispositions, but these dispositions are partly gender-coded and shaped by unequal social conditions.

10. Missing Out: The Double Failure of Intensified Dispositions

The title "Missing Out" captures the double failure at the heart of the story. Majdy and Samra both miss out, but not in the same way. Majdy misses out on rootedness, cultural continuity and emotional belonging. Samra misses out on adaptation, mobility and the possibility of living meaningfully in the present.

This double structure is what makes the story more complex than a simple opposition between assimilation and cultural retention. If the story only criticised Majdy, it would become a defence of cultural retention. If it only criticised Samra, it would become a defence of assimilation. Instead, Aboulela shows that both become damaging when intensified into absolutes. Majdy's assimilative disposition becomes destructive when it turns into contempt for origin. Samra's retentive disposition becomes destructive when it turns into paralysis before the present. Each character preserves one necessary dimension of migrant life while losing another. Majdy keeps movement but loses memory. Samra keeps memory but loses movement. Hall's (1990) understanding of identity as a process shaped by both continuity and becoming helps illuminate why both main characters ultimately "miss out." Each character severs one dimension of migrant identity. Majdy pursues becoming without continuity while Samra preserves continuity without becoming. As a result, both characters represent incomplete forms of migrant subjectivity.

Thus, the story suggests that migration requires a more multilayered negotiation between routes and roots. Migrant life cannot be sustained by pure assimilation because the self cannot be rebuilt through erasure, and nor can it be sustained by rigid retention because the self cannot survive by refusing the present. Migration demands a form of identity capable of both adaptation and continuity.

11. Towards Anchored Integration

Although "Missing Out" does not offer a simple solution, it implicitly gestures towards what may be called anchored integration. By anchored integration, I mean a mode of migrant existence in which adaptation to the host society does not require contempt for the culture of origin, and attachment to the culture of origin does not prevent engagement with the present. This proposed notion of anchored integration is related to, but not identical with, Bhabha's theory of hybridity (Bhabha, 1994). It is, also, informed by recent acculturation research that treats integration not as a simple midpoint between assimilation and separation, but as a complex capacity to maintain meaningful links with the heritage culture while also participating in the receiving society (Berry et al., 2006; Schwartz et al., 2010; Ward & Geeraert, 2016). Thus, anchored integration names a specifically literary and ethical formulation of a broader acculturative problem, examining how the migrant subject may adapt without self-erasure and maintain bonds without immobilisation. Vertovec's (2007) account of super-diversity further

supports the need to move beyond rigid binaries of origin and host culture since migrant identities are shaped by overlapping histories, positions, affiliations and social locations rather than by a single opposition between homeland and hostland.

While Bhabha's "third space" challenges fixed cultural binaries, anchored integration emphasises the ethical and psychological balance between cultural continuity and present adaptation.

Majdy lacks the anchor. His movement toward London becomes a movement away from himself. He seeks integration through disidentification, and this leaves him historically and emotionally ungrounded. Samra lacks integration. Her attachment to origin remains powerful, but it does not become a flexible resource for living in London. She remains anchored, but the anchor becomes a weight. Anchored integration would require what neither character fully achieves: the ability to carry cultural memory into new circumstances without freezing it and the ability to adapt to new systems without converting adaptation into self-rejection. This is why the story's conclusion is not a simple victory for either character. It exposes the insufficiency of both intensified dispositions.

Aboulela's insight lies in representing migration as a pressure that does not merely change people but reveals and magnifies their prior orientations. The migrant condition intensifies what is already present: ambition, longing, shame, memory, desire, detachment and attachment. Under the pressure of displacement, these dispositions can become either resources or traps.

12. Conclusion

Leila Aboulela's "Missing Out" offers a complex account of migration as an intensifier of assimilative and retentive dispositions. Majdy and Samra are not blank subjects transformed only by London. Before migration, Majdy already shows an assimilative orientation through his academic ambition, emotional distance from political struggle and individualistic conception of success. Samra already shows a retentive orientation through her embeddedness in collective experience and her communal imagination.

London intensifies both dispositions. Majdy's detachment becomes cultural rejection, and Samra's rootedness becomes nostalgic stasis. Yet neither intensified position leads to fulfilment. Majdy gains mobility but loses rootedness. Samra preserves rootedness but loses mobility. Both remain alienated, and both are left missing out. The story's central achievement is, hence, its refusal of easy binaries. It does not ask the reader simply to choose assimilation or cultural retention. Instead, it exposes the dangers of both when they become absolute. Migration, in Aboulela's story, requires more than movement and more than memory. It requires a difficult balance between adaptation and continuity, between the future one seeks and the past one carries.

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